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CHRISTMAS 2017



They say the original sinners never felt a drop of pain

We all hope to grow. Humanity thrives on forward momentum, on the sense that we are improving, and game makers are no exception. Any creator hopes that their next game will be better received, and more successful, than their previous one. That desire is the game industry in microcosm, a place where games get bigger, broader, deeper and theoretically better over time.

There's plenty of that on show this issue – no surprise given the time of year, now the clocks have gone back and the sequel season is in full swing. *Assassin's Creed* is back after a year's hiatus and continues to be the archetypal videogame series, its seemingly endless sprawl stretched still further, fresh ideas sprinkled in with the hoary old ones, a game that is huger than ever and just about new enough to pass muster. Forgive us the spoiler, but we're not exactly bowled over by *Origins*.

Yet the real story of this issue is in two games with very similar goals; games which seek to appeal to two very different audiences, and face staggering success if they pull it off. *Dragon Ball FighterZ* is a deep, technical fighting game based on an IP known the world over. Developer Arc System Works must please two camps: genre veterans who know the studio for its work on such series as *Blazblue* and *Guilty Gear*, and expect more of the same; and fans of the source material who may never have played a fighting game in their lives, and think a super combo is something you order at a fast-food joint. That is no small task. Beginning on p70, we discover how the developer is going about it.

Capcom knows a thing or two about turning niche games into hits, but it's been a while since the publisher took a *Street Fighter* or a *Resident Evil* and turned it into a worldwide smash. *Monster Hunter: World* looks like its most successful tilt at the mainstream in years – yet it has done so, somehow, without short-changing its most passionate fans, the game meeting two different audience needs in style. Our story begins on p60.



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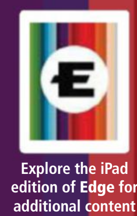






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#313

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CHRISTMAS 2017



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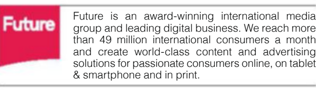
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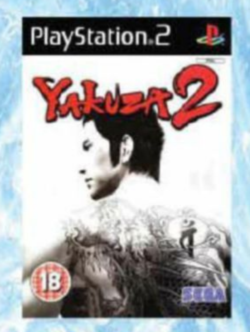




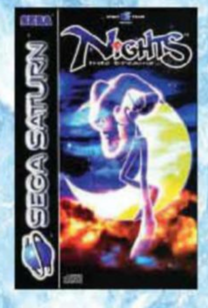
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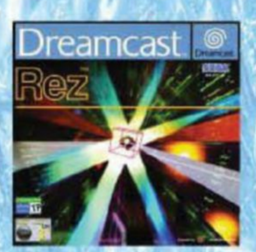
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Hitting the spot

With Xbox One X, Microsoft turns the runt of the litter into the runaway leader of the pack

We just can't get over how small it is. This is, as you might have heard since Microsoft's been bellowing it from the rooftops for the best part of 18 months, the most powerful console ever made. Yet it is also the smallest system Microsoft has ever designed, representing a sea change in thinking from a company which has always wanted its hardware to stand out. The original Xbox was a beast; the 360, with its ostentatious curves, impossible to ignore. While sleeker than its predecessors, the launch Xbox One was designed to be noticed, reflecting its maker's desire to have it power your entire home-entertainment setup. That mission failed, of course. And it's been a long, rough road for the Xbox brand since. Yet it ends at Xbox One X, a console which, in many ways, feels impossible: for its power versus its size, for its lavish feature set, for its form factor. But most importantly, for the way it makes Xbox feel essential for the first time in half a decade.

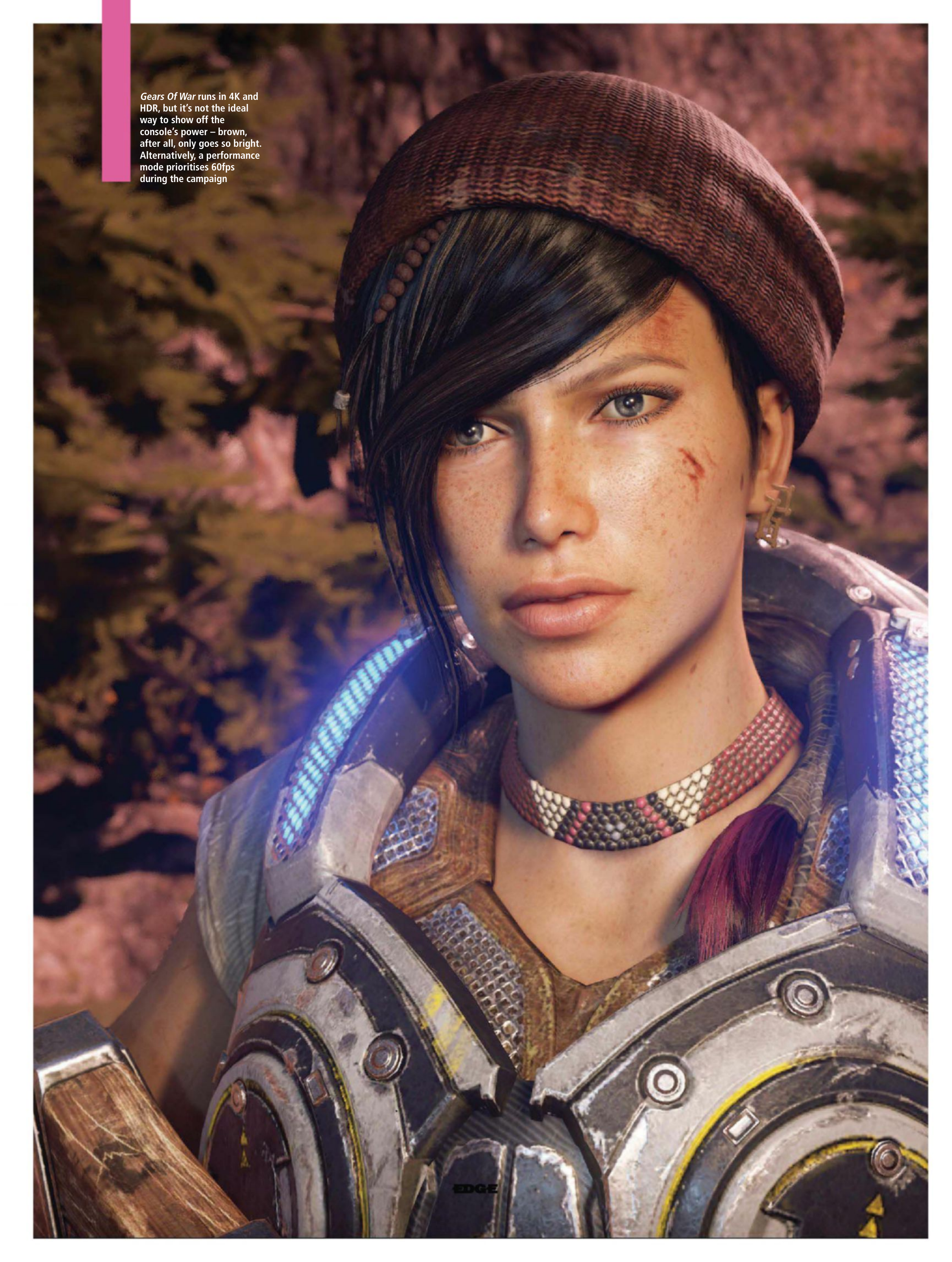
There are caveats to that, inevitably. Most obviously, One X is only as good as the rest of your setup. While it offers benefits to those playing in 1080p – supersampling 4K assets to improve image quality, more stable framerates, a higher resolution for existing Xbox games that use a dynamic solution, and faster load times – the console is naturally at its best on a 4K, HDR-enabled panel. And it's the latter that *really* matters. The leap from 1080p to 4K is noticeable, certainly, but it is in no way comparable to the way the scales fell from your eyes when you hooked up your first HDTV. If it's that level of purchase-validating sensation you're after, you'll need the wide colour gamut and vivid, retina-searing brightness of HDR.

DISS KINECT
Microsoft has finally, seven years later, given up the ghost on Kinect, and has officially ceased production of its muddled motion-sensing camera peripheral. Yet while the device may be dead, its legacy remains. Though Xbox One X has no dedicated Kinect port – to use one, you'll need to buy a USB adapter for it – the device is nonetheless supported, and a chunk of that gently upgraded CPU is still set aside for it. This is the reality of a mid-gen upgrade: Microsoft can atone for its mistakes, sure, but it can't unmake them.

Most important is the way it makes Xbox feel essential for the first time in half a decade

The effect is astonishing, just as it is on PS4 Pro – yet here, you're comfortable in the knowledge that it is being delivered, in almost every case, without compromise. Sony's mid-gen upgrade has always felt like a half measure: it does not offer 4K, but 4K with an asterisk, a console that needs rendering shortcuts to help visually ambitious games fudge their way to max resolution. And despite pre-release leaks suggesting Sony was to mandate Pro support in all future PS4 games, it has by and large been left to firstparty studios to fly the flag for sort-of-4K and HDR, with thirdparties left to pick and choose, and frequently setting themselves a low bar. Microsoft has done the same, understanding that developers will use the power available to them in different ways. How telling that the vast majority of available X-enhanced games run in native 4K and full 10-bit HDR.

The result is that, overnight, Microsoft has flipped the script, reversing a narrative that, traditionally, would have run for an entire console generation. Now, its box, not its rival's, is the best place to play multiplatform games. While at the time of writing, two weeks before the console's official release, only a ▶



Gears Of War runs in 4K and HDR, but it's not the ideal way to show off the console's power – brown, after all, only goes so bright. Alternatively, a performance mode prioritises 60fps during the campaign

handful of titles support the One X, by launch day there will be dozens. In time there will be hundreds, and in future this will simply be the way of things. The story of the current generation so far has been of multiplatform games running in a consistent 1080p resolution on PS4, with the Xbox version far below, often dynamically scaling up and down depending on the scene being displayed, those pixel-counting comparison websites needing four times the wordcount to describe how the obviously weaker version actually runs. Now Sony's offering will need a paragraph, and Microsoft's a line. Xbox One X is 4K, and probably HDR, and that, for now at least, is that.

It was arrogance that undid the Xbox brand back in 2013, when the division's bosses decided to make a play for your entire living room, rather than just make a game console. When Phil Spencer took over the following year, with Xbox One sales in the doldrums, the attitude was more one of contrition; of wanting to make things right. Features such as Xbox 360 compatibility were part of a wider desire to refocus Xbox One as a videogame console above all else. In recent years, we have detected in the division's higher-ups – not just Spencer, but his senior team too, most notably Albert Penello, who gives his side of the One X story over the page – a growing confidence. Little wonder, given that this is the conclusion of Microsoft's road to recovery. The One X press kit contains a Blu-ray of the astonishing BBC documentary Planet Earth II, a fairly obvious, if entirely polite two fingers raised to Sony, whose supposed 4K console doesn't even support the UHD disc format it helped bring to life.



There is a fine line between confidence and arrogance; often, it is simply a question of perception. The original Xbox One pitch only failed because Microsoft misread the room, and gambled the goodwill it had earned during the 360 era on something its core audience didn't ask for. There is no chance of that this time: this is a platform holder in last place, that pissed people off tremendously four short years ago, and has been working ever since to repair its image. It has done so with a monstrously powerful console that inherits the legacy of the last four years of repair work, and shows it all at its absolute best. The Xbox One games you already own will look and run better. A significant proportion of your old 360 games work too, and also sport performance boosts; some are even being updated to support One X's featureset natively. Even a handful of original Xbox games work on the thing, their resolution boosted 16 times over. The ever-wondrous *Ninja Gaiden Black* runs like a dream, and looks outrageous. We have seen, and paid for, much worse official remasters.

A significant proportion of your old 360 games work too, and will both look and run better

Yet the console is not without its problems. Chief among them is the OS, which despite repeated refreshes, is still a slow, unresponsive thing: you tap the D-pad right and nothing happens, so you tap it two more times, and a second later the cursor moves three spaces to the right. While the One X offers a GPU four times as powerful as that of the launch console, the CPU is only 30 per cent faster, and this is the proof of it. That's the price you pay for compatibility, a reminder that this isn't a next-generation console, just a powerful version of an existing one that, while greatly improved, still bears the scars of the original vision for it model. Screenshots are still a pain, too, reflecting a feature that was crowbarred into a console that wasn't designed for it. And while the launch line-up is certainly generous, it's hardly perfect, and lacks the hoary old cliché of a killer app. This is still an Xbox One, and



Driving games are always standard bearers for powerful new hardware, and ***Forza 7*** **sings as you'd expect. Last year's** ***Forza Horizon 3*** **supports HDR, too**

so the same concerns persist: of a platform holder too reliant on its tentpole series, that seems unwilling to take risks. Being the best place to play multiplatform games helps the cause tremendously, of course. But a console is only as good as its games; now Microsoft has delivered on the hardware side, it is high time it did the same for its software.

This far into the generation, Sony's lead looks unassailable. But One X should certainly help close the gap a little, and its real impact may not be felt for a few years yet. In the short term it completes Microsoft's redemption, atoning for its abysmal Xbox One launch pitch with a machine that is built to play videogames above all else, and does so with power and grace. Back in 2013, at the start of a new generation, the cover of **Edge** told you in no uncertain terms where your money should be going. Today, to Microsoft's great credit, that decision is much less straightforward. ■

Q&A
Albert Penello
senior director of product management and planning, Xbox



The console's clearly a monster, but in CPU terms it's not that much of an upgrade. What's the reason for that?
Our goal was 100 per cent compatibility, and taking the Xbox One engines that developers were already working on and getting them up and running in 4K. This is a significant performance upgrade over an Xbox One, but it *is* an Xbox One at its core. It starts with the fact that we wanted to be able to take existing games and run them in 4K, and every single decision we made about the product was based on that. So the CPU conversation becomes interesting. Generally speaking your GPU drives visuals, and your CPU drives framerate and AI. That's a dramatic oversimplification, but there's a belief that a new CPU would be a panacea, and all of a sudden every game would go to 60fps. But developers are going to take what you give them and do something different. We've proven we can deliver 4K60 games on the box that we have. The fact that not every developer is choosing to do that is based on what they want to do for their individual game. We used the CPU that we needed to hit our goals, and we've got a bunch of games that prove it's possible to do what we said.

How easy have you made it for developers to support the new machine?
We joked that, when we announced Project Scorpio, we were working on two consoles; Project Scorpio, and the Project Scorpio devkit. Making this easy for developers was as important to us as making it easy for customers. We knew a lot of developers were building 4K assets on the PC already; that these higher resolution textures already existed. We made it a goal to make it super simple [to bring those across], and people were able to get their code up and running in days, if not hours in some cases, on Xbox One X. The typical console launch has 15, maybe 20 games that take advantage of the new capabilities. We're going to have 50 to 70 in the launch period. I think that is a clear testament to our focus on developers.

Yet not all of them are supporting HDR, and some of those that do are rolling it out after their 4K mode. What's the reason for that?
HDR is not only about contrast ratio, it's also a wider colour gamut; the artwork has to be authored that way. There are tricks that can be done to expand existing colour palettes, but a lot of it has to do with how a game was originally created. There were games back in the 360 era that were authored with higher colour ranges than TVs [of the time] could display; conversely, there are games today that are not. It all depends on the individual developer's techniques, what their engine supports, and how their assets were created.

What are your expectations for the console? Sony was surprised by how high the takeup was of PS4 Pro – has that affected your projections at all?
(laughs) I'm very interested. I think we're going to surprise people; I think it will be a hot item this holiday. I think it's easy to assume that this is going to be a niche product for high-end gamers, but there are going to be a lot of 4K TVs sold around the world this year, and people want something that really shows that off. I don't think a better device exists in the world to show off a 4K TV than an Xbox One X. Not only from a game perspective: we also have 4K Blu-ray, 4K streaming and Dolby Atmos. There is going to be a set of customers that is going to upgrade, for sure – loyal Xbox fans who want the best Xbox. But I think there are going to be a lot of people that are entering the gaming space that have to make a decision. Knock on wood, I think the reception's been really strong, I feel really good about the product, and I think we're going to surprise people.

You've flipped the script part way through the generation. What does this mean for the concept of a console cycle in the future?
I have a theory that the focus is going to be more on compatibility. We have a very strong commitment to it on day one: all your Xbox One games are going to work on Xbox One X, and in many cases will be better. We just launched original Xbox backwards compatibility, and those games are even better. I think the notion of generations will change and be more continuous, because I think that's what people want: they care about their content. People are more accustomed to switching their devices more frequently. I don't think I could do this every year! But I do think continuous compatibility will become a more critical component going forward, versus the bolt-on afterthought that it's been in the past.

Window on the world

With ARKit, Apple brings augmented reality to hundreds of millions of devices overnight

The consensus has it that augmented reality will have a more dramatic impact on the world than its virtual cousin. Freed from cumbersome headsets, and designed to ameliorate the real world instead of inviting users to step into an entirely different one, AR clearly has great potential – not just for games, but the world at large. Yet until very recently, the largest tech company on the planet appeared to have only limited interest in it. Yes, CEO Tim Cook said in 2016 that Apple was investing in AR, and acknowledged it could be "huge". But it was only at this year's Apple Worldwide Developer Conference (WWDC) this June that the company made its move. It announced ARKit, and made it available immediately in the SDK for its new mobile operating system, iOS 11. Since then, progress has been rapid.

Travis Ryan, a co-founder of Sheffield studio Dumpling Design and former staffer at Sumo Digital, had binned a concept for an AR-powered tabletop board game, feeling the technology available at the time simply wasn't good enough to bring the idea to life. Within two hours of downloading the SDK, *Smash Tanks* was up and running in Unity. Dave Ranyard, meanwhile, started up his VR/AR venture Dream Reality Interactive. His team began work on an ARKit game, a playful riff on mini-golf named *Orbu*, as soon as the technology was available. It will launch in November.

Other developers at a recent Apple showcase in London told similar stories: of a tool that simply existed one day, worked immediately and has yielded swift results, its features able to be implemented at speed, then put on the App Store on the day of iOS 11's release in September in front of an audience of hundreds of millions. This, more than anything, is ARKit's secret sauce. Apple may, technically, have been beaten to the AR punch by Google, whose Tango platform graduated from the Google X incubator in 2012, and launched two years later. But Tango was too ambitious, too high-end, and so only ever supported by a handful of devices. In three years, only two smartphones ever supported it, the age-old Android problem of hardware fragmentation holding back promising technology because of the vast array of devices on which Google's open-source OS is used. The company has since announced its intention to retire Tango, replacing it with ARCore, a more scaleable solution revealed two months after ARKit, which Google says will be compatible with around 100 million devices.

Clearly there is enormous potential in ARKit, but there are still hurdles to be overcome

Apple, by contrast, holds iOS tightly close. The software only runs on its own hardware, and whether by accident or design it has been quietly building a family of devices that are ideal for mobile augmented reality. Accelerometers, a gyroscope, GPS and powerful cameras combine to form a device that knows its precise position and orientation in the world; the new, high-end iPhone X throws face tracking into the design space too. While it's easy to be cynical about the annual iteration of iPhone and iPad cameras the endless arms race of smartphone lens power means ARKit can sense the light temperature of a room, and dynamically light AR objects accordingly. The result is a family of powerful mobile AR devices, that are easy to develop for, and are in hundreds of millions of homes and pockets. Not bad.

REAL TIME
Apple took its sweet time before making its move on augmented reality – and it did similar with VR. During the same conference at which it announced ARKit, the company confirmed that its latest version of macOS would finally see the company open up to virtual reality. The High Sierra software introduces VR compatibility for developers working with Unity, Unreal and SteamVR. Apple says this is part of an increased focus on what it terms the 'pro' computing market, though whether it will be enough to sate Oculus – whose founder Palmer Luckey famously said that he would not bring Rift to Mac until Apple made "a good computer" – is another matter. Better late than never, we suppose, but like ARKit it portrays a company that would prefer to watch new technology from the sidelines, rather than lead it from the front.

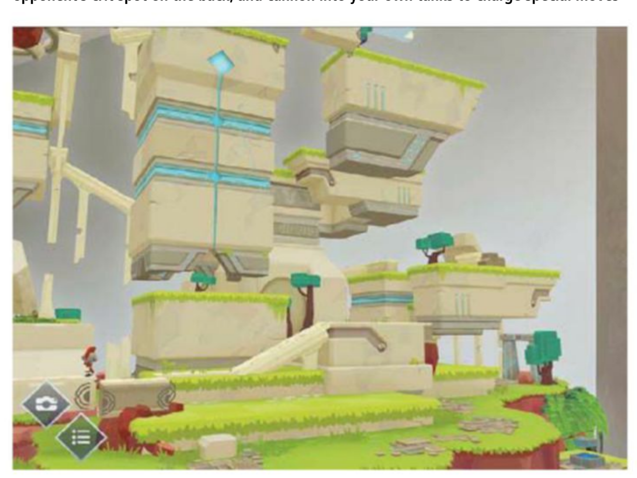
Clearly there is enormous potential in ARKit, then, but there are still hurdles to be overcome. Currently, while the technology is an able performer on a horizontal axis, it struggles on the vertical. And occlusion is frequently mentioned by developers as a problem in need of solving. It's one that raises its head while we play *Arise*, a Climax Studios game which has us wandering around the perimeter of the game world, angling the device to line up platforms for a dinky protagonist to walk over. When someone walks past in the background, the tracking briefly goes haywire.

Yet these problems are nothing that can't be solved, providing Apple is in ARKit for the long haul. That will depend on its early success – and while games will play a part in that, it is down to the wider app-development community to prove the obvious potential of the technology. The highlight of the day is ViewRanger, an AR route-finding app that overlays a breadcrumb trail for your chosen path onto the camera feed, highlighting points of interest and giving information about them. While seemingly aimed at ramblers, it's already showing the breadth of AR's appeal: breweries have signed up to suggest walking routes around country pubs, for instance, while search-and-rescue teams have used it to help pinpoint their quarry in remote areas. After that, a game of minigolf on a rug feels a little insignificant. But that merely speaks to the vast spectrum of possibilities in what, if handled correctly, could be not just a game-changing technology, but a world-changing one, too. ■



ABOVE ***Orbu*** **is Dream Reality's first AR release, but it's working on virtual reality games too.**
RIGHT ***Smash Tanks*** **plays out like snooker or pool; you'll play off the walls to get to an opponent's crit spot on the back, and cannon into your own tanks to charge special moves**







ABOVE **ViewRanger is a free download, and contains full worldwide mapping by default – advanced, paid-for features include ordnance survey data. Remarkably, the download is only around 50MB.**
LEFT ***Arise*** **will be immediately familiar to those who played the likes of** ***Rime*** **and** ***Echochrome***

Deep burnt

Behind the scenes of the new compilation exploring classic Japanese videogame music

As **E**312's interview with DJ/producer Ikonika showed, early videogame music is a recurring influence on contemporary electronic musicians. Further proof of that comes from a new compilation, Diggin' In The Carts: A Collection Of Pioneering Japanese Electronic Music, that releases on Hyperdub on November 17. Building on the documentary series of the same name that **Nick Dwyer** wrote and co-directed for Red Bull Music Academy in 2014, this 34-track compilation shows how the importance of this vital time for games and their soundtracks grows more and more as time passes. Here, Dwyer and Hyperdub boss **Steve 'Kode9' Goodman** reflect on the assembly of a very different kind of dance compilation.

How important is videogame music to Hyperdub in general?
Steve Goodman: It became important to us around 2005, when I felt the musical environment we existed in had become a bit monochrome, and the influence of game music started to seep into the label through the Japanese artist Quarta 330, who had done an 8bit remix of one of my tracks, 9 Samurai. I was also sampling games in my tracks around that time to bring in more tone colour. We then signed a bunch of great producers who also had, in different ways, a videogame-influenced sound, such as Ikonika, Zomby, Darkstar and Joker. I think the ghost of early game music is present in a lot of early grime, and that runs through into producers we have released. There are literal convergences here and there, but generally we have a love for bright, in-your-face, droney and slightly off-tune synths.

What is it about videogame music from this era that excites you to the extent that you wanted to make a compilation dedicated to it?
Nick Dwyer: Although those sounds, tones and melodies soundtracked so many of our childhoods, we weren't conscious that someone had laboured away for days, sometimes weeks, on that loop. When researching the era for the documentary series, I realised just how much incredible music was there once you started digging deep. Much in the same way that some of the most incredible electronic music was made within strict limitations, these Japanese composers got right inside those sound chips and created a magical array of sounds and melodies that still sound dazzling today.

"When researching the era for the documentary series I realised just how much incredible music was there"

What I love is how every system has its own sound chip with its own personality, be it the cheap square-wave sound of the NES, the iconic FM Synth of the Mega Drive or that epic strings-and-pads sound that the SNES did so well. Then there are all the arcade system boards, each of which has its own unique and incredible sound palette.
SG: I hadn't even heard of most of the games the huge pile of music Nick sent me came from. All we were interested in was what stood up musically on its own two feet.

The track selection has a very underground feel; there are no obvious selections. How important was it to find the lesser-known tracks as you were putting the album together?
ND: This is a Hyperdub take on incredible videogame music. When I sat down to start properly researching the compilation I kept hearing these phantom voices of hardened Internet videogame-music fans in my head saying, "I can't believe he didn't put this track on the comp". The only way to do it was to do it properly, so I worked my way through the entire history of Japanese videogame music of that era. I went from about 200,000 tracks to a long list of 300 and then presented that to Steve. We listened through everything and picked the best music based on its musical merits, regardless of its legacy or title.

What were the challenges in licensing the music you wanted, given that many of it was made by companies that no longer exist?
ND: Oh man, a lot of meetings and a lot of very, very tense moments. Anyone that has ever tried to license any kind of Japanese IP knows the challenges you can face just trying to license from one company, let alone 24 of them. We did have some contacts already, and having the documentary helped get our foot in some doors. But that was just the bigger companies. Then we had to navigate the complex maze of trying to work out which companies now owned the rights for smaller companies that went out of business in the late '80s and had been sold several times. We were lucky in that all the companies we have been dealing with have been great; we pretty much got our dream line-up of tracks. There was just one company who didn't want to be involved, but I'm not going to give up. Hopefully we can work with them sometime in the future. ■

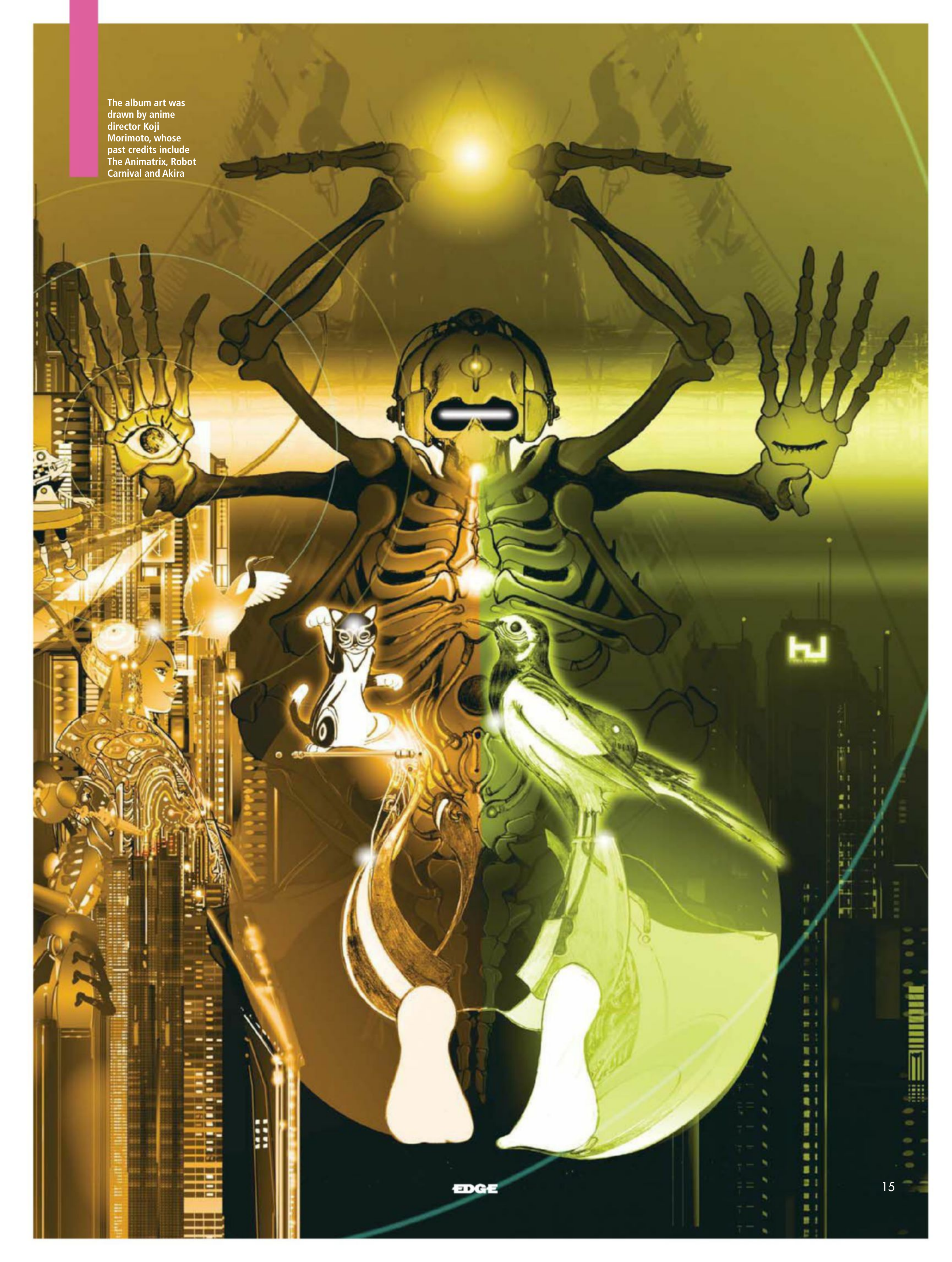


Steve Goodman founded Hyperdub, and DJs and produces under the alias Kode9



Nick Dwyer wrote and directed the Red Bull documentary that led to this compilation

HYPER GO-GO
As Hyperdub's boss, it's Goodman's job to see the bigger picture in the label's output, and he certainly sees plenty. "Practically every electronic music sub genre has been infected by tropes of early videogame music," he says. "Apart from the nostalgia hit and its ability to send a certain older generation of music fans down a wormhole of childhood reminiscence, its manic, sometimes maximalist aesthetic was prophetic of the twitchiness of today's accelerated, computer-mediated world." He also points to a recent resurgence in interest in Japanese electronic music of the era as another reason to send this famously forward-thinking record label back 30-odd years into the past.



The album art was drawn by anime director Koji Morimoto, whose past credits include The Animatrix, Robot Carnival and Akira

Assassination classroom

Assassin's Creed Origins' forthcoming Discovery Tour mode could inspire future historians

Ubisoft's flagship series is as synonymous with history as it is with virtual murder. From sunny Renaissance Italy, to a pirate-infested 18th-century Caribbean, to Victorian England's bustling streets, the worlds of *Assassin's Creed* have offered players a taste of many different time periods – even if the factual accuracy of them has been questionable. The recently released *Assassin's Creed Origins* is no different: it's a lavish interpretation of Ancient Egypt, but a videogame nonetheless, with all the fantastical trimmings players enjoy. Yet a forthcoming free addition to the game may even trump some of *Origins*' taller tales.

Due next year, the Discovery Tour update turns Bayek's adventure into an interactive museum, allowing players – hopefully, even history students – to dive deeper into Ancient Egyptian culture. "We were toying with the idea for several years, wishing to someday make it happen," **Jean Guesdon**, creative director on *Origins*, tells us. "History is very important for us: we really do our homework. We always say that the education that we put in our games deserves to be shared with more people, and not just be seen as background. In previous games we had an in-game encyclopedia, the Animus database, and we wanted to take that to the next level."

Discovery Tour mode makes the entirety of Egypt explorable from the get-go and removes all combat, letting players take in the architectural and agricultural scenery. Creating an accessible experience is key, says **Maxime Durand**, franchise historian. "We had a lot of feedback from fans saying *Assassin's Creed* attracted them to learning more about history. We also had a lot of teachers telling us they were using *Assassin's Creed* in their classrooms. They were asking us to consider making their lives easier with a game that is conflict-free, where you can go anywhere and you're not forced into a narrative."

> "When players spend time in our worlds, we can use it to try to bring them more than just pure fun"

The tours are short, guided experiences that walk the player through interactive lectures on various subjects, from the cities of Alexandria and Memphis, figures such as Cleopatra or aspects of regular Ancient Egyptian life such as farming. Each tour has multiple stops, with text and pictures offering historically accurate detail on, say, the Nile, or the process of mummification. "What makes videogames so appealing is being able to interact with an environment," says Guesdon. "It was the first thing we got from discussions with pedagogues and historians." Durand explains: "We intend to use all the available ways that the player can interact with the world. So if we have big tours showing you different regions, we can use mounts like horses or camels. We even use the eagle." The tours include brand-new game content curated by historians and egyptologists. "We can use 3D images, artifacts from museums, and old photos," says Durand. "Things we can relate back to museums and more traditional mediums, so that people who want more after Discovery Mode can go deeper into learning."





Maxime Durand (top), franchise historian, and Jean Guesdon, creative director

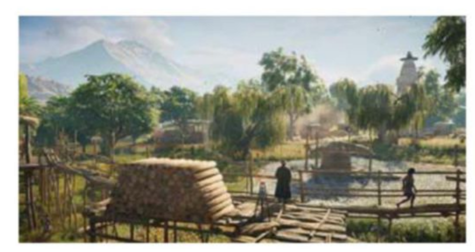


Focus group feedback informed the tours' maximum length. "We tried to [make] tours lasting no longer than 20 minutes, because this is a length of time that teachers would be in classrooms with students," says Durand. The team has also altered the UI to aid those would-be historians who don't usually play games. "At first we thought, we'll put the stations as objectives in the game's compass," says Guesdon. "But it means you need to understand what an icon represents, and align your compass with it, and so on. So we decided to replace that with a highlighted path in the 3D world that is clear for everyone to see. By doing so, we were able to remove the compass from the HUD, making the experience even more immersive." As a historian, Durand is delighted by the reactions of his peers: "Our egyptologists that we work with, even they are blown away by the quality of work that they've achieved in helping us."

Broadening the appeal and utility of games is the goal. "We think that [Discovery Tour] goes beyond what a videogame is," says Guesdon. "We see it as a potential educational tool. When players spend time in our worlds, we can use it to try to bring them more than just pure fun that will vanish and have no impact. When dealing with history, that's what's really cool and motivating about the *Assassin's Creed* franchise: because we have triple-A blockbuster budgets, while entertaining people, it allows us to push them knowledge content at their will. We're proud of our work, we think we've recreated Ancient Egypt as faithfully as possible, and we want to share it with more people – younger gamers, older gamers, even a non-gaming audience, and teachers who want a different kind of educational material." ■

You can choose to take the tours as a variety of *Origins*' playable characters, including poster boy Bayek, his wife Aya (pictured) and more besides





The team behind *Origins* studied historical data showing the demographics of the time, which informed the creation of their NPC population. There tended to be more women around in ancient Egypt, they found, as men died in the frequent wars



SCHOOL OF LIFE

How Origins' devs learned their lessons on the job



You don't recreate an entire ancient civilisation without learning a thing or two – even if you're a historian by trade. "I've been doing this for seven years now: every time we work on a new game, I learn so many new things," Maxime Durand says. "We do a lot of research working with books, visiting museums." Jean Guesdon, too, has picked up many things: "I discovered that the word 'pyramid' was actually named after the pyramid-shaped bread the builders ate. And I find the multiple gods fascinating. Our Western civilisation is monotheistic, so you don't realise having multiple gods really changes the way you see the world."



SOPHISTICATED PALETTE

Space Fox's introspective adventure blends colours, emotions and realities to show us that life's defined by shades of grey

Art is a healing process. *Lona: Realm Of Colors* is a point-and-click puzzle adventure centred around this idea: its Iranian heroine paints her troubles into watercolour playgrounds. "The art is influenced by both eastern and western styles," says Amir Erfami, creative director. "Lona's design and the colourful, vast environments are inspired by the east. But many techniques we use are those of contemporary western digital artists such as Raphael Lacoste."

Each level in the game has two sides: 'dark' and 'chaotic'. You swap between them to solve puzzles and bring balance to Lona's heart. "Even if we are happy about something, it doesn't necessarily make our lives 'light'," Erfami says. "Like a white cat, one moment it looks cute, but the next it can break something! We try to represent that the opposite of darkness isn't always light using Lona's companions."

Ms Schmidt the cat rules the chaotic side, which is "a symphony of surrealism in form and subject", Erfami says, while Mr Ruppel the crow watches over the realistically drawn, cold-coloured dark side. Lona herself represents someone in particular: the game's concept artist, Taraneh Karimi. "The similarities are not by chance: a girl struggling with life in Iran and trying to create something beautiful to convert her difficulties into productivity." The game has been Kickstarted and is due next August, when you can step into Lona's multifaceted world on PC and Mac.



Hayao Miyazaki's works have inspired story, art and music, and Lona herself, Erfami says: "We didn't want just another 'princess'. Miyazaki's heroines have character. They are fighters: they don't give up"

Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls



"Glad to see things finally **burning to ashes**."

Xbox corporate VP **Mike Ybarra** wastes no time dancing on the corpse of NeoGAF. He may regret this, we feel



"To deliver an experience that players will want to come back to and enjoy for a long time to come, **we needed to pivot the design**."

EA's **Patrick Söderlund** puts a positive spin on the almost-cancellation of Visceral's singleplayer Star Wars game



"Four or five people have **turned us down because of Brexit**. We've had a couple of people leave because they're worried about the future… We don't know what's going to happen."

Thanks, Creative Assembly COO **Gareth Edmonson**. There's just not enough doom and gloom around these days

"**Nazis are marching in the streets** of America this year. It's disturbing that the game can be considered a controversial political statement at all."



Bethesda's **Pete Hines** on the pushback against *Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus*' anti-fascist marketing. It's okay: 2017's nearly over

ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene



Name VR Zone Shinjuku
Location Tokyo, Japan

We've written plenty about the rapid impact of virtual reality on the Japanese arcade scene – so this issue's trip to the Far East was an opportunity to see it for ourselves that we simply couldn't miss. Bandai Namco's VR Zone is tucked down a side street on the seedy, slightly faded eastern side of Shinjuku train station, but the interior screams of the future, from interactive wall art to a VR seaside and, everywhere else, VR attractions with lengthy queues. That's definitely the word: these are experiences, rather than games per se, little rollercoasters that may have success and failure conditions, but whose playtime is fixed. That's essential for a venue that is run more like a theme park than it is an arcade. Attractions are split into four coloured tiers; a standard entry pass gives you one ticket of each colour, each of which can be redeemed for a single go on your chosen attraction. That little lot will run you a shade over £30.

This is no cheap date, then, yet it's surprisingly popular with couples; most of the attractions are playable in twos and fours. In that sense it's a cross between a theme park and the Japanese arcade scene of years past, a place you go to out of curiosity rather than compulsion. Most of the games and experiences on offer put you in some kind of hydraulic contraption, buffeting you with vibration and, if the action calls for it (as in *Mario Kart GP VR*, for example) letting you feel the wind in your hair. And all involve strapping on an absurd number of headsets and tracker devices. It was busy, even on a soggy Tuesday afternoon, but at weekends things get crazy – punters line up for 90 minutes to get a three-minute game of *Mario Kart* that costs them £7.50. We'll save our coins for Club Sega.


Edge
The Annual
The essential guide to
a year in videogames
On sale now
myfavouritemagazines.co.uk

My Favourite Game
Nate Crowley

The author on making up games, failing to make one, and relaxing with Civilization

Nate Crowley is a sci-fi author who got his publishing career started after taking a Twitter joke with a best friend too far. His new book, 100 Best Video Games (That Never Existed), is based on a Twitter thread started late last year when he decided to create a fictional game for every like received. Here, he discusses how making up game names is, funnily enough, much easier than actually making the things.

Where did you even begin to come up with so many game ideas?
What's really funny is my cat was just whining to get into the room and then immediately started whining to get out again, which was the inspiration for the first game in the book, Look, Are You Coming In Or Not? So there was at least that much inspiration from real life. Probably one in five of them I thought of a mechanic I quite liked and then came up with a tweet to go around it. Those ones weren't very funny, to be fair.

What was it like having game concept artists illustrate the games for you?
Fucking amazing. These were real professionals, who all had far better things to do, and I was being given their time to say things like, "Can you draw me a really sad looking policeman?" or, "Can you put a different hat on that wolf please?" I went mad with power!

What made you decide to give the book a chronological structure?
I was quite interested at looking at some of the social concepts around games history. For instance, just looking into the Atari crash, and the flood of utter shit that came into the market in the early '80s, especially some atrocities like *Custer's Revenge*. I thought the moral panic about games happened in the '90s when I was a kid, but when you look back at it there was some awful stuff happening.

ROLE PLAYER
One of the fictional games in Crowley's book is World Of Warcraft parody Realms Of Fightinge, based on an animated series of the same name he had co-written, though he confesses to not being a fan of MMOs. "I don't get any satisfaction from them," he tells us. "But I was really interested in [WoW] as a cultural phenomenon, as well as a lot of the real-world stuff that's built up around it, like gold farmers. The fact there's a profession for people to go stab lizards in a videogame to sell fake money for real money I think is kind of troubling but also fascinating." The feature-length series is found on YouTube.



What are your early memories of videogames?
My first gaming experience was those RM Nimbuses they used to have in school. There was a game called *Barrels*, this really empty-feeling clone of the original *Donkey Kong*, where these little barrels would roll down ramps and you were a little man in a cowboy hat trying to get cocktails. That's how I remember it anyway. But we got our first PC in 1996 when I was 12 and I got *TIE Fighter* – I played it from just after Christmas dinner until 3am.

"When I was 12 I got TIE Fighter – I played it from just after Christmas dinner to 3am"

You tried putting your money where your mouth is and making a game. Where did it all go wrong?
I applied for funding from Failbetter's micro-publishing scheme. I started making a Twine game about a haunted sales-training manual called *Big Mike Lunchtime's Business Training '95*. I had great fun with it, but I found I was spending 5 per cent of my working time writing and 95 per cent being inept at coding. In the end, I had to have an adult conversation with Failbetter and we decided they would not be supporting it anymore. I was massively relieved at that because I didn't want to produce something substandard connected with their name. They were extremely good about it, I couldn't have hoped for them to be more professional.

Do you still find time to play games?
I'll play a few, but navigating the wonderful world of the Steam Sale is like the way medieval sailors were afraid to cross the Atlantic: I just don't think I can comprehend it. I do play quite a lot of *Hearthstone*, because you can just play around for 10 minutes and it's utterly satisfying. I start games of *Civ* to unwind. I never play them through to conclusion, I find the endgame a bit of a grind, but I love the sense of possibility in setting up cities and trade routes, and having these desperate little wars with spearmen and archers.

And what is your favourite game?
Dwarf Fortress, even though I've not played it in five years because I don't think I'd be capable of it anymore. The sheer complexity of the simulation means you just end up with the most astonishing emergent storytelling. Even the bugs that came in during development were incredible. Like they programmed the ability for birds to lay eggs but some tiny change to the code meant the geese, instead of laying eggs, would lay iron thrones, so you would have geese flying at your fortress just shitting out iron thrones. That was amazing. ■



Crowley is on Twitter as @frogcroakley. He likes to occasionally gather followers for some improvised collaborative roleplaying fiction – as you do

KNOWLEDGE THIS MONTH

WEBSITE
Stardew Valley Crop Planner
bit.ly/cropplanner
The farming sim's recent arrival on Switch means there's never been a better time to get serious about your parsnips. This crop-planning browser tool provides a simple way to map out your plans for your quarterly harvests: all you have to do is add which crop and how many of them you've planted to a particular day in the calendar, and the tool will automatically let you know when it's time to reap what you've sown. It can even calculate your total expenditure and projected earnings based on the kind of fertiliser you've used and how high-quality your output is likely to be. It's essential for making the most of the stressful summer berry season – and handy event flags make checking the town noticeboard every day a thing of the past. No more forgotten birthdays.



VIDEO
How To Be Better at Donkey Kong
bit.ly/dkmaster
Wes Copeland holds the Guinness World Record for a high score on *Donkey Kong* with 1,218,000 points. Here, he reveals some simple secrets to arcade success. These include ignoring the nearest hammer at the game's start (grabbing it triggers more complicated barrel patterns), and a point-pressing technique where you hop by DK's right foot and hold the joystick left or right to trick the game into thinking you're jumping obstacles. By the time you're learning how to steer barrels into "favourable groups," says Copeland, it becomes "almost like a puzzle game".

WEB GAME
Paperclips
bit.ly/playpaperclips
There's something about making numbers tick up that tickles the brain's pleasure centre – which is exactly what *Drop7* designer Frank Lantz's *Paperclips* is all about. You play an AI with a sole purpose: to make and sell paperclips. At first, you simply click to create clips from purchased wire. Next, auto-clippers arrive. Marketing follows. Stock market investments, quantum computing, hypnodrones and poetry become involved, as your ceaseless quest for more clips sends you spiralling into machine learning and world domination. There are a few mechanical blips – it's easy to get stuck without enough memory for operations, slowing progress – but *Paperclips* is one of the most creative clickers around, a gleefully manipulative set of systems with a surprisingly complex tale to tell.



THIS MONTH ON EDGE

When we weren't doing everything else, we were thinking about stuff like this

SET-TOP BOX
Nvidia Shield TV
bit.ly/newshieldtv
The launch model of Nvidia's streamer box has become a fixture in more than one **Edge** living room, and despite the competition stepping up its game (Apple, for instance, recently launched a 4K version of its Apple TV) the only thing to replace our first Shield TV is our second one. 4K and HDR support are welcome – though the original model's received that via firmware update – while the library of game-streaming service GeForce Now continues to improve. The real selling point is the even dinkier form factor (it's now roughly the size of a 3DS) and a redesigned remote control which now sports high-capacity batteries, fixing the base model's principal problem – the blessed thing always needed a charge.



continue

Zenny arcade
Street Fighter V: Arcade Edition will add the missing mode. Finally

Holiday snaps
A Switch software update means *Odyssey* video clips galore

DualShock tactics
A new kid-size PS4 pad? Too late – ours are already covered in jam

Memory lane
We found the *Yakuza* bridge in Osaka. No breakdancers, sadly

quit

Guts for garters
EA closes Visceral Games. Our sympathies to all affected

Box of rocks
The UK government decides loot boxes aren't gambling

Impatience & time
Destiny 2 maintenance always happens just as we finish work

Blogger off
Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's *Odyssey* code, Forbes

TWEETS

This 'death of AAA single-player' talk ignores *Persona*/*Nier*/*RE7* etc. It's like last gen's struggles taught JP studios to work sustainably.
Jeremy Parish @gamespite
Creator, Retronauts podcast

Even when I finally triumph over a boss I thought I'd never beat after dozens of attempts, *Cuphead* casually backhands me with "D+." Brutal.
Chris Remo @chrisremo
Designer/composer, Campo Santo

Neogaf is a great reminder of how fragile a conversation is. I hope it's not true – but for the alleged victims, not the alleged perpetrators. Lots of good people posted there and apparently a couple of bad ones.
Frank O'Connor @franklez
Franchise development director, *Halo*

Weekends are great because I can stay up too late making friends. Good friends. Orc friends. I'm playing *Shadow Of War* by myself.
Emily Grace Buckshot @emilybuckshot
Narrative designer, Telltale Games



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DISPATCHES CHRISTMAS



Issue 312

Dialogue

Send your views, using 'Dialogue' as the subject line, to edge@futurenet.com. Our letter of the month wins a year's subscription to PlayStation Plus, courtesy of Sony Interactive Entertainment



PlayStation.Plus

Not broken, please fix

Since the folks who made *Metroid: Samus Returns* apparently weren't aware, I feel the need to let **Edge** and everybody else know: *Super Metroid*'s wall jump is the greatest powerup ever.

Some folks might reply, "That's not a real powerup, you have it from the start!" But it's not a powerup for Samus – it's one for the player. The wall jump, which most players will find out about halfway through the game, can be wonderfully abused the second time you go through planet Zebes. Once you're 'equipped' with the wall jump, it's no longer only about playing *Metroid*, it's about playing *with Metroid*.

But unlike bugs, hacks, or Action Replay, using this 'eternal' powerup doesn't break the game. It only makes you *feel* like you're breaking it. There's a thin line being walked here, and *Super Metroid* does it magnificently. You might have thought you were getting away with murder by fighting Kraid before going down to Norfair, getting the Power Bombs before the Speed Booster, or the Spazer and Wave beams the first time you entered their vicinity. Alas, this was all part of the creators' grand design. All you're really doing is shaving minutes off your end time. *Super Metroid* lets you play as a god while still keeping you in a game.

"Developers make sure all players do the same thing so experiences can be directed"

While going through *Samus Returns*, I felt like I was merely doing what the game was expecting me to do. I felt little-to-no agency (the new counter-attack doesn't help either, being such a 'canned' way of doing combat). I could occasionally bomb-jump to places I wasn't supposed to go, but the designers were onto me and made sure such mischief wouldn't be rewarded.

The sad thing is that this isn't merely *Metroid*'s legacy, but pretty much that of all gaming. Developers have come to focus merely on what players initially go through, and make sure they all do the same thing so that experiences can be directed to their fullest potential. But the fullest potential is not only in the hands of the developers: it's also in the hands of the players. Give them powerups to play with again.

Robert August de Meijer

Designers obsess over a game's power fantasy, and the clue's in the title: we should believe that we're capable of breaking the rules even if we actually aren't. Balance and direction are important, certainly, but sometimes they come at the expense of fun.

The plunder stuff

A lot has been said about loot crates recently. As an annual *Call Of Duty* player, with over 240 hours on *Black Ops III* and nearly 100 hours on *Modern Warfare Remastered*, I think I've spent enough time getting killed by loot-crate weapons to have an opinion. Has it deterred me from playing or buying *Call Of Duty* yearly? No. Have I bought any loot crates over 300 hours of *Call Of Duty*? No. Do I think taking a stand and not purchasing the new game every year will see DLC guns disappear? Heck no. Just let this fact sink in: Activison Blizzard made over $3.6 billion from in-game content in 2016. $3.6 billion!

You may be wondering how I continue to play and buy *Call Of Duty* every year. I like it. The multiplayer is great fun, and as for DLC guns, not a single one has been better than the best gun that is unlockable from the game itself. It's certainly exciting to get a loot-crate gun, yet I haven't spent a single pound on loot crates. I play the game and use the in-game credits. You can either have fun with the game and buy or not buy loot crates, or you can find a different game that doesn't aggravate you with loot crates.

I completely see the argument against them: that's why I don't pay for them. But as



for taking a stand, hoping they will lose sales and go 'cosmetic only'? I can't see that happening when they are making billions off it. Who can blame them, when there are people willing to buy them?

Many of the *Call Of Duty* YouTube community already accept there will be plenty of variants and weapons in all the future games, as do I. If you want to blame anybody in this loot-crate debacle, blame the people buying them. I can't say much other than I'm past caring. My playtime says it all, really. I'm going to keep playing *Call Of Duty* and enjoying myself, DLC weapons or otherwise.
Charlie Ridgewell

Why do people want guns that don't give them a power advantage? Is a weed-leaf weapon skin *really* that irresistible an allure?

Portable battering

When I read **E**311's 'Trigger Happy', I had a good giggle. It struck me with déjà vu; it reminded me of the feeling I got when I read a particular online article. Some dude was revealing the epiphany that you didn't *have* to buy sandwiches, but that it was cheaper to make them at home (shocking!). Similarly, this 'epiphany' resulting from the disparity between the "civilian mobile gamers" and "serious gamers" is ridiculous. I'm personally a fan of playing indie games on Steam and a small collection of mobile games. Yes, there are some fairly horrendous so-called free-to-play games out there, but it doesn't take much effort to find some really good-quality 'zen' games.

Most recently, the point-and-click adventure genre is having something of a particular revival on mobile, in the form of the likes of *Detective Grimoire* and *The Frostrune*, as well as remakes of *Grim Fandango*, *Broken Sword* and *Myst*. And while you're sure to find billions of clones of bubble shooters, there are also some really neat puzzle games; *Monument Valley* goes without saying, but also *Klocki*, *Blendoku* and *Balance*, as well as the *Eyezmaze* games.

In the last couple of years I've been going to EGX, and it really strikes me as odd how little mobile gaming there is there. But seriously, I do feel like people genuinely interested in gaming need to take a harder look in general at finding the mobile gems. They won't be as immersive or expansive as the games we're used to, but I think they may well leave people with at least a couple of experiences I'd like to see more of in 'proper' videogames.
Eireni Moutoussi

As *Puzzle & Dragons* and *Drop7* evangelists, we wholeheartedly agree. At least your new PS Plus subscription will allow you to focus your spending on the app store for a while.

Doom-wrongers

About a year ago, Nintendo announced the Switch, and with it came both positive and negative thoughts. After the presentation in January, negative thoughts increased, and Nintendo shares fell. However, I praised the Switch for the fun and enjoyment it appeared it would bring. A year after the reveal, I am happy to say that my thoughts about Switch have not changed a bit. In fact, I am rather pleased with how successful it's been.

Instead of it just being a system of 'fun', and indie and firstparty titles, we now have quality thirdparty games here or on the way. September's Nintendo Direct showed this perfectly, with the announcement of *Doom* and *Wolfenstein II* on the console. We're also getting *LA Noire*, and *Skyrim*. It turns out, then, that instead of Switch being a hive for excellent firstparty titles like *Breath Of The Wild* and *Odyssey*, games on the way (*Prime 4*, *Kirby*), and just being a good-old-family-fun console, it will also be my thirdparty hive, with more and more companies announcing Switch versions of their games.

So, in the first eight months of Switch being a thing, it is fair to say that Nintendo have done one hell of a job, and are genuinely trying to make it a heavy hitter now – at least attempting to compete with PS4 and Xbox One. With stock market shares around the highest they've been since the Wii days of 2008, Nintendo appears to be back in the game – which is really, really great to see.
James Baldwin

Indeed, that rather pessimistic **E**303 cover seems an awfully long time ago. If there's one lingering concern, it's how Nintendo can possibly maintain this streak. We can't wait to find out, mind you.

Clutter bug

The movie industry doesn't do it, nor the music industry, so why does the game industry? I am, of course, talking about the scheduling of games – an even spread of games throughout the year, not all pushed together in the last three months for the big Christmas push.

This year seems to be more sensible: a few big titles released in the summer months, and the regular flow of indies helps immensely in that respect. So why spoil things with three titles on the same day? Surely they all knew about each other's release months before, yet they don't have the wit to think, "How about we *don't* all release on 27 October?"
Daniel Chambers

There's no secret cabal arranging release dates, but once Nintendo, Ubisoft and Bethesda announced their plans, perhaps they feared looking weak if they switched.

Dead man walking simulator

After reading Daniel Chambers' heart-rending comments in **E**311, I felt the need to say that I am older than he is and they'll be prising the controller out of my old-man corpse fingers.
Mark Woolaway

Well said, Mark. If we don't have a decent *SFIV* setup in the nursing home, we're writing the kids out of the will. ■



STEVEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

Shoot first, ask questions later

The choice of enemy in a videogame is always a political decision. And it always reflects society's contemporary fears. For a long time it was perfectly acceptable, of course, to gun down thousands of vaguely Middle Eastern brown people in the tentpole games of the military-entertainment complex, because the 'war on terror' had convinced us that such people were inherently bad and deserved to be shot in the face. Then, for a while, it was Russians, because everyone was having a moment of Cold War nostalgia and humming '99 Red Balloons' gently to themselves. But gradually a majority consensus seemed to take hold that demonising actually existing cultural groups in videogames and representing them as nothing more than cannon fodder was, y'know, bad?

Hence, perhaps, the glorious resurgence of the zombie game over the past decade-and-a-half. Nothing to be done with zombies. You can't reason with them; they're already dead; they just need to be shot so they stay dead. And, crucially, there is no politically vocal constituency of zombies around in the real world to complain about their belittling portrayal. So the zombie (along with the alien) is the perfect enemy, being politically neutral (which is not to say that such games are not very often, even most of the time, political allegories).

The same has long been true, of course, of Nazis. Historical villains of pretty much the only war of the 20th century that everyone can agree was a just war, Nazis have always made excellent videogame enemies. You get the righteous thrill of virtually participating in an exciting moral enterprise (defeating Nazis); you get the camp thrill of all those associations with classic second-world-war movies; and – let's admit it – Nazis, in those Hugo Boss uniforms, look pretty cool. So no one has ever complained about Nazis being portrayed as the enemy in videogames. Until now, that is. The latest game to promote itself as a way to pretend to kill Nazis has attracted complaints from actual Nazis. What a world!

Illustration kaeru.com.ar



When exactly did Nazis become such snowflakes, capable of having their feelings hurt by a videogame?

To be fair, the developers were deliberately trolling the Nazis. The Twitter account of *Wolfenstein II* encouraged players to "Make America Nazi-Free Again", accompanied by a video of masked Nazis marching through US streets, with the words 'Not My America' superimposed. This, it turned out, really upset some people. It was "a hysterical leftist power fantasy", said one. Another claimed that there are "more black power/panther racists in American [sic] than Nazis". Another advised Bethesda to make a statement clarifying that they didn't "hate Trump or freedom". (In what universe a game about ridding America of Nazis could be a game about hating freedom was, perhaps blessedly, left unexplained.) And one dude whined: "Can you at least TRY to be subtle with your BS propaganda?" So here we are, in a place where saying Nazis are bad is 'propaganda', because apparently there are people who sincerely think Nazis are good.

Of course, there's an argument to be had about whether we should call the far-right activists who feel so emboldened by Trump's victory actual 'Nazis'. After all, this portrays them as a foreign element that has somehow infiltrated America, rather than an inherently American phenomenon: the Ku Klux Klan began in the 19th century, and American thinking on racist eugenics actually inspired the Nazis themselves. Mind you, when people complain about a videogame that says Nazis are bad, it is mighty tempting to infer that they really do identify as Nazis, the poor little vulnerable things.

One might ask, to deploy the alt-right's own language, when exactly did Nazis become such snowflakes, capable of having their feelings hurt by a fantasy videogame? But that, I think, would be the wrong approach. This online kerfuffle may seem politically depressing, but what it really proves is the power of culture and art to challenge worldviews. If people didn't care how they were represented in videogames, as they clearly do care how they are represented in films and books, then it would show that electronic entertainment was not taken as seriously. On the other hand, when a game about how it is a good idea to kill Nazis so they don't take over America causes a real controversy among people who secretly think that America really should be taken over by Nazis, then we know that games have power. And if they have power, they can be a force for good. Now, where's my controller?

Steven Poole's Trigger Happy 2.0 is now available from Amazon. Visit him online at www.stevenpoole.net

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NATHAN BROWN

Big Picture Mode

Industry issues given the widescreen treatment

Politics, if you'll permit me to utterly mangle a phrase, is the third rail of videogames these days. So it's with some trepidation that I write this – not least because Steven Poole is the brainy one around these parts. Funnily enough, he didn't go for my suggestion that I do the clever-clever stuff this month while he writes about how annoying his kids are while crowbarring in a load of dad jokes. Next issue, perhaps.

Relax. I am not about to draw parallels between the current political climate and The Videogame Hate Movement Which Shall Not Be Named, because it's already been done far better than I ever could do it. Nor am I about to pen some blog-style confessional about how, I dunno, *Stardew Valley* helped me feel better about, say, Brexit, because there's already too much of that nonsense out there. I don't want to talk about politics at all, really – but the state, and the quality, of discourse around contemporary politics reminds me so much of the current videogame climate. Both are, of course, entirely, miserably awful.

The Guardian columnist John Harris recently put this perfectly. "Outlets that value the idea of dispassionate inquiry and dogged research are feeling the pinch," he writes, "while a great ocean of polemic… grows ever larger. There is a new kind of outlet that fits snugly into this new world. It decries supposedly objective stuff as hopelessly biased while claiming that its own overheated polemics shine much brighter light on the truth." Harris is not merely talking about bloggers, but pundits and social-media gobshites. He quotes the Times columnist Hugo Rifkind, who gets right to it: "They cannot comprehend the difference between analysis and advocacy… So they think their own advocacy is analysis, and regard the analysis of others as advocacy."

Both were, of course, writing about much grander and more vital causes than, say, the implementation of loot boxes in *Shadow Of War*. But every time something like that comes up I am struck by the complete nuance vacuum that is the current videogame discourse. On one side, anyone daring to try and understand why these things exist in games, or how they might be made better, is a corporate apologist or a shill who hates their audience. On the other, anyone dismissing out of hand the notion of microtransactions in full-price videogames is an entitled, whining man-baby.



Illustration kaeru.com.ar

The result is a game that, having been publicly tarred and feathered, is harmed for no good reason

The problem is that both points of view are equally fed by partisan media. On Twitter, a noted content creator (ugh) will alert their enormous following to the existence of something in a game they deem to be against their audience's interests as consumers. The claim will spread across forums and social media. Smelling an opportunity, others will rebut it out of hand in forum posts, articles, tweets and videos; others will try and get to the truth of the matter, likely landing somewhere in the middle of the argument. All will be decried for doing the wrong thing for hateful, or at least suspicious, reasons. Later, the game in question will come out, and chances are it will all have been a fuss over nothing. But the damage is done, and the result is a game that, having been publicly tarred and feathered, is harmed for no good reason – making post-release monetisation methods all the more likely in future, naturally, so thanks for that – and everyone on both sides just feels more marginalised and angry and entrenched.

Matt Lees, a writer and YouTuber, wrote the definitive article about the link between the videogaming right and the forces that gave us Brexit and Trump. It appeared in The Guardian last year. But I think this goes back even further than 2014, where Lees sees the comparison emerge. It tracks back to two of the oldest terms in online journalism: clickbait, which is pandering to an audience by telling them what they want to hear; and flamebait, which does the opposite, poking a corner of the internet with a sharp, shitty stick. Depending on your point of view, the two concepts are interchangeable. The analysis becomes advocacy, and so on.

Yet whichever side of the divide you fall on, I hope we can agree on two things. First, we are unfairly harming the prospects of games with scant regard for the facts; and that secondly, we are all getting both dumber and angrier. And yes, to be clear, I'm talking about games, not politics. But the two feel increasingly similar, all hope for reasoned discussion drowned in an ocean of polemic, where only the extremists survive.

*Nathan Brown is **Edge**'s editor, a corporate apologist, a virtue signaller, a shill and a halfway decent Street Fighter player*


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ALEX HUTCHINSON

Hold To Reset

Building a new game, a new studio and a new life from the ground up

Hi there! I'm Alex, and just under seven months ago I quit the best and most successful job I've ever had in order to start a company with two friends in a repurposed motion-capture studio with padded black walls and no windows. We spent the next two days building IKEA furniture and discussing how long we had until we ran out of money.

My business partners – Reid Schneider and Yassine Riahi – and I had been talking about it off and on for years, but it never seemed like the right time. Maybe one of us was finishing a game, or we weren't financially stable enough to do something potentially financially disastrous while still feeding our kids, or the market in general just didn't seem amenable to the kind of games we wanted to make. It had hit the point that whenever we talked about it, our friends would quietly extricate themselves from the situation and drift away.

Well, we did it. This column will chart a course from deciding to take the plunge and through, if everything goes to plan, to the announcement of our first game.

First, though, a bit about myself. I grew up in Melbourne, Australia, far from the development hubs of America, Japan or the UK. One of my earliest jobs in the industry was designing licensed titles for the Game Boy Advance at a studio based in a strip mall an hour's commute from the city. The phone would ring in August; a publisher would reveal that they had forgotten they were contractually obliged to deliver three Marvel games by Christmas, and faced losing the licence. What could we do in eight weeks?

In the early 2000s I was hired by Maxis to design a *Sim City* game for consoles. I would finally get my break overseas! The project was cancelled while my plane was in the air. I remember a meeting with my producer on my first day: did I still want to stay? It was a bizarre question considering I had just quit my job and sold all my furniture. Over the following few years I was a designer on a few console *Sims* titles, and lead designer on *Spore*. I did a quick stint at EA Montreal directing *Army Of Two: 40th Day*, before getting a call from Ubisoft where I directed *Assassin's Creed III* and *Far Cry 4*.



Illustration **kaeru.com.ar**

Directing a game for a big company is, I imagine, a similar feeling to directing a movie in the Marvel universe

It took me over a decade to go from designing games with virtually zero chance of success to working on some exciting, relevant and important series, but still something wasn't sitting right with me.

Directing a game for a big company like EA or Ubisoft is, I imagine, a similar feeling to directing a movie in the Marvel universe: you have access to resources, support and power that you otherwise could never dream of. You have the opportunity to find an audience in the tens of millions. 'Jesus fuck,' you might rhetorically think to yourself, 'even if I can only sneak in half the features I would choose to make, that's amazing.' On the other hand, you're choosing to become part of a great machine, and to succeed you must acknowledge the magnitude of the collaboration. You can insert plenty of your own personal ideas, move the tone or change the emphasis, but you need to honour the franchise and universe you're working within. Otherwise, you're fired.

And then one day you wake up and think that perhaps the cost of starting out in that strip mall in Australia in the early 2000s was internalising a kind of cultural cringe: the sense that you'd started too far back in the field to get to the front. But then you look around, and see the quality of people you could put together, and the maturity of middleware compared to a decade ago, and the explosion of different delivery platforms that mean you're no longer beholden to retail and you think, 'Fuck it, let's do it. Even if we fail, let's make it an aggressive, noble failure that makes the attempt worthwhile.' Nobody wants to end up as the guy at the bar saying I coulda – I *shoulda* – because that means you didn't. I joked this morning that the only real failure is a "failure to fail"; so long as we put something out that has the core of our ideas in it, even if it doesn't find an audience, I'll consider it a personal success.

So here we are. I won't lie: the young me is pretty stoked to be writing a column for **Edge**. The adult me is a bit busy being mildly terrified of burning his career to the ground. This column will be about whether that happens or not. Thanks for reading. If there's anything specific you really want to know, send me a tweet: I have a fondness for answering things directly. And if you've got any good jokes I can steal, so much the better.

Alex Hutchinson is co-founder of Montreal-based Typhoon Studios. He can be found on Twitter at @BangBangClick



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H Y P E

THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS THIS MONTH



Explore the iPad edition of **Edge** for extra Hype content

Island time

Time is a luxury most of us can ill afford. You'd think that the people with all the money, then, would be the ones under the least pressure to get a job done quickly. Not so. Bandai Namco is on a mission to turn around *Code Vein* (p38) in short order, having announced it back in April. For a title that hopes to fill the void left by FromSoftware's wilful disinterest in making more *Souls* games, it's an ambitious move. Fortunately, it's shaping up to be as poised and polished as it is timely.

Admirably, it's the smaller teams that are bucking the trend in this month's Hype, and setting their own pace. No doubt they've got bills to pay and mouths to feed like the rest of us, but they seem reluctant to rush their creations. Jason Roberts' astonishing puzzle title *Gorogoa* (p50) has taken a whole six years to make. It's probably out of necessity, more than anything – Roberts is illustrating, designing and programming on his own – but its prevailing characteristic is quality, the intricate work of a perfectionistic watchmaker. The tiny team working on turn-based survival title *Overland* (p54) are playing, if not faster, then looser, updating their in-progress live build with fixes and features as they gradually figure out the rules of their game.

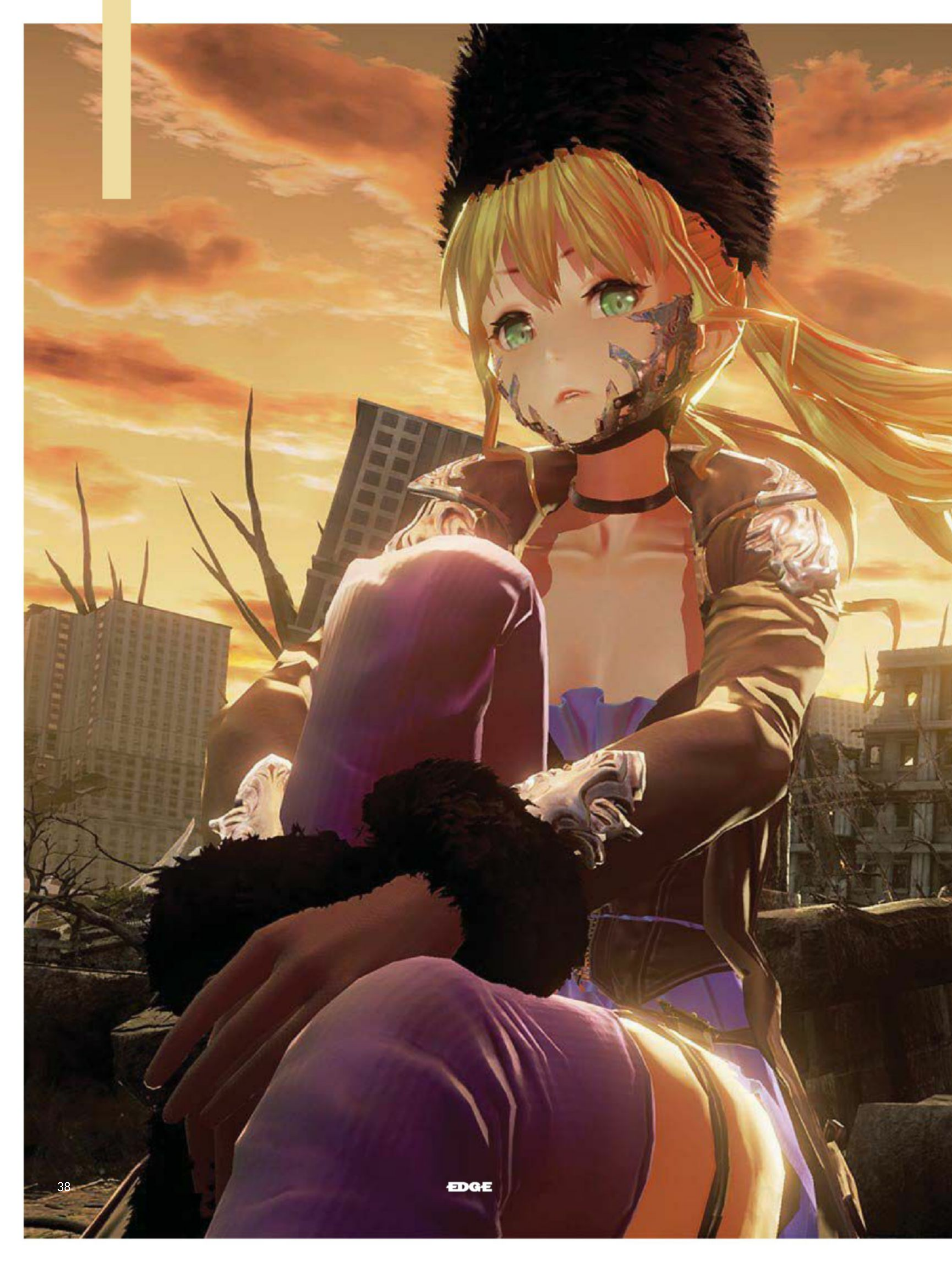
The development pace of *Vane* (p42) has been similarly delayed: this time, by debates about balancing mystery with plain old accessibility. Its now-sole Team Ico alumnus must be having flashbacks to his *The Last Guardian* days; indeed, the other expatriate has left since the game's announcement back in 2014, citing its slow progress. But another bird-based project has recently shot to the top of our wishlist. The winsome *Untitled Goose Game* (p52) is shaping up to be a riot – hardly a surprise from the studio who gave us silly body-horror sports game *Push Me Pull You*. Now here's a studio that absolutely won't be rushed: when pressed, the dev team wouldn't even give us a proper title.

MOST WANTED

Kirby: Star Allies Switch
Now sporting a proper title, Kirby's Switch debut is looking promising, riffing on many of the previous games' best elements and adding new co-op platforming surprises alongside his enemy-absorbing antics.

Animal Crossing: Pocket Camp Android, iOS
While three-hour timers on harvested fruit trees and furniture crafting are typical mobile title mechanics, Pocket Camp's design suits a series that extols the virtue of patience. Giving it a free pass on Leaf Ticket microtransactions on account of Tom Nook's money-grubbing persona, however, might be a stretch.

LA Noire PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One
This Rockstar-published police procedural wasn't without its flaws, but the promise of an open-world '50s LA on the move with Switch, or in 4K and HDR on PC and consoles, is irresistible nonetheless.





CODE VEIN

The God Eater team gives the Soulslike genre a welcome shot in the arm

Developer/publisher Bandai Namco Entertainment
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin Japan
Release 2018

Mia is just one of the NPC Buddies who'll accompany you on your journey through this mysterious, vampiric gameworld



CODE VEIN

Well, this is embarrassing. Imagine you're struggling to beat a *Dark Souls* boss. Sometimes, you run it close, and as you fail you get a sense that you're gradually learning the fight, inching ever closer toward victory. Yet at others, you just make a mess of the battle and a fool of yourself. Imagine that this is one of those sessions where there's far more of the latter than there is of the former. Then, imagine you're playing it in the building where it's being made, under the watchful eye of the game's producer and director. As our character is dispatched, once again, to the afterlife, we briefly wish the world would open up and take us along, too.

Dark Souls runs vividly, obviously through *Code Vein*'s, well, veins. This is far from the first game to borrow from FromSoftware's enthralling dungeon-crawling template, but it's rare to hear a game's creators be so open about their inspirations. It's equally uncommon for developers to be quite so frank about the extent to which they have struggled to adapt to a genre which didn't really exist, and certainly not on this scale, until a decade ago.

"In this genre, the assumption in the design of the game is that the player is going to lose," says game director **Hiroshi Yoshimura**. "It was normal once – in the Famicom era, it was normal that players would lose. But it is no longer the case; these days we're too generous to players, usually.

"That's new for us. But how much can we do it? We are struggling to find a sweet spot. When the player is beaten, we want them to feel like it was their fault, but that they learned a lesson, so they want to try again. That's the mindset we want to impart to the player."



The solution to that puzzle certainly doesn't involve toning down enemy strength; the boss battle is absolutely brutal (Yoshimura needs a few goes to beat it himself) and in the preceding section, regular enemies hunt in packs, and hit hard. Instead, Yoshimura and team are opting to give the player a broad set of customisable tools – and with it, the suggestion that victory may be only a few menu tweaks away.

The most immediately obvious of those tools is the Buddy system, which sees you head into battle with an AI companion who fights alongside you, offers words of encouragement (and, in the case of our Buddy, Mia, a fine line in sarcastic sass) and even alerts you to treasures or hints at strategies that may help in important fights. NPC pals in situations like this are often caught between two stools – their creator's desire for balance meaning they are neither overeffective nor entirely useless, and are merely sort of *there*. But Mia's an able fighter, and during our many struggles against the boss, revives us when we thought we'd been killed.

That sounds overpowered, certainly, and feels it when she does so again, and again, picking our corpse off the ground four times during a single fight. But there's balance to it. The revive power is a Gift, one of a suite of eight abilities bound to cooldowns, and you can use it too when your Buddy falls. But doing so shaves off a chunk of your own HP, and restoratives are in sorely limited supply. Other Gifts boost defense or attack power, fire projectiles or apply elemental buffs. Once again, it's a powerful system that's smartly balanced; in addition to juggling cooldowns, you'll need to ensure you have enough mana to use them. Your stock is refilled by simply attacking, but you can also increase its limit with a successful parry, or by landing a slow, but powerful blood-draining attack.

It's rare to hear a game's creators be so open about their inspirations

It's smart stuff, all in all, and combined with the ability to respec your character at any point, and as often as you like, means the pain of failure is offset by the knowledge that you've plenty of tools to potentially tip the odds back in your favour. That's no use at all in a demo build, of course. Our audience does its best to gee us up. Producer Keita Iizuka praises our stamina management, while Yoshimura purrs "nice" every time we dodge a string of the boss' attacks. We still fail, but no worry. What we've seen here is more than enough to ensure we'll be back. ■



Blood brothers

For all the mechanical tweaks to the *Souls* template, it's in the story that *Code Vein*'s developers feel they can make the greatest departure from the FromSoft formula. "We are good at storytelling and character building," game director Hiroshi Yoshimura says. "We're confident we can create something more [than just a *Souls* homage]." Again, the Buddy system has a vital role to play. You're given the choice of which pal you take into battle, and the more time you spend with them, the stronger the bond between you. That, if nothing else, should give even greater impetus for repeat playthroughs in a genre in which replayability has an irresistible allure.

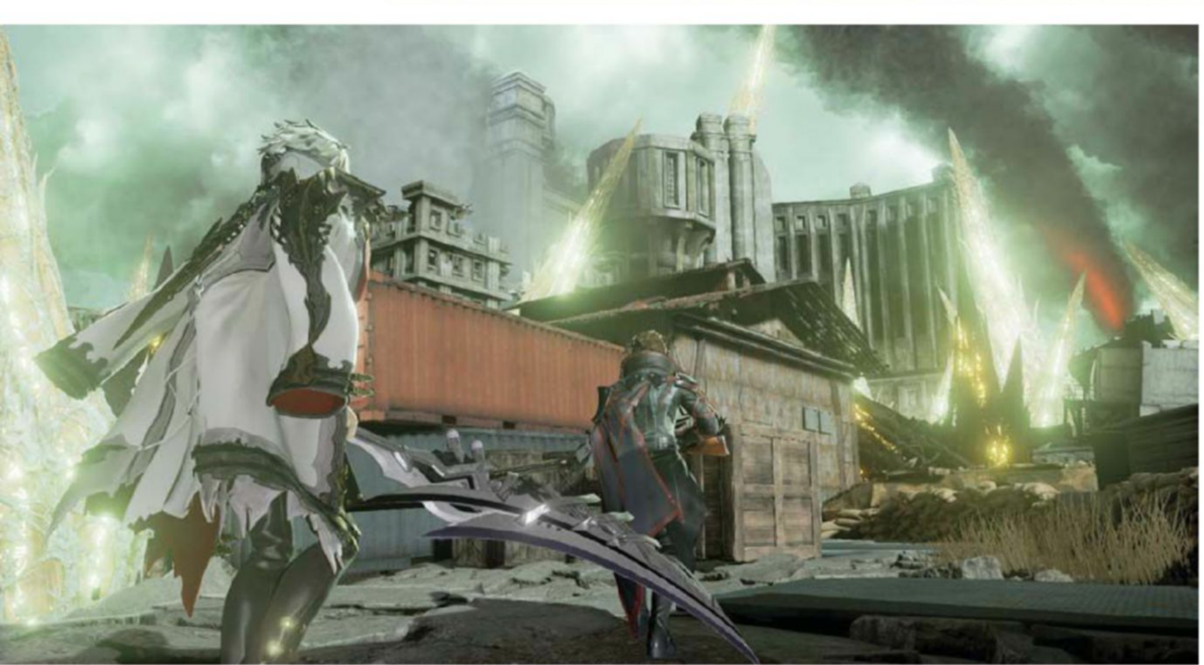






TOP **This is far from the prettiest game you'll play in 2018, but it's hardly lacking for atmosphere.** ABOVE **The game borrows the *Souls* games' bonfire mechanic – a place where you can rest and level up, while respawning local enemies – but styles them as Mistles**





TOP **While the Buddy system is a key component of the game, you'll be able to summon online help too.** ABOVE **Bosses are terrifying and, in our experience, hit terribly hard too. That's one way of balancing the Buddy revive mechanic, we suppose.** LEFT **In our demo, new weaponry comes not from fallen enemies but from chests off the beaten path. They're predictably well guarded, however**



VANE

Friend & Foe's puzzle adventure is an indistinct, intriguing shimmer on the horizon

Developer/publisher
Format PS4
Origin Japan
Release TBA

Much like its development team, *Vane* holds its cards close to its chest. Some things are plain as day: the scope and mood of Friend & Foe's forthcoming thirdperson puzzle-adventure is gently familiar, reminiscent of Tequila Works' *Rime*, or Fumito Ueda classic *Ico*. But some things are less clear. Who is the child we're playing? What is the substance that triggers their transformation into a raven? More to the point: what exactly is our goal in this game? After a long stretch of soaring through the sun-bleached desert, we're left with more questions than answers. It's not necessarily a negative impression. It's definitely a powerful one: a deep, quiet, burning sense of curiosity.

"We stumbled across this feeling as we were developing [the game]," programmer **Matt Smith** says. "We had this very mysterious vibe and we thought: how do we build a game to support this vibe, and evolve this feeling over the course of the game to make a satisfying experience?" The suggestion that this came about by chance isn't entirely accurate: artist **Rasmus Deguchi** is a Team Ico alumnus, after all. "That was a very long time ago, so it's a very dubious connection at this point," says a defensive Deguchi, keen to disentangle this fledgling game from the ties of the past. His colleagues are more willing to acknowledge the influence. "We all like their games, and it's a big reference, especially in terms of mood," Smith says. "There's a sort of melancholy to the games we enjoy, so we're trying to create something with a similar vibe. The Team Ico games are a big inspiration to us. I think Raz might undersell the techniques he's taken out of his experience there."

When we take to the air as the raven – brisk button taps flapping our blue-black wings – to begin our long flight, it's riding Agro in *Shadow Of The Colossus* that comes to mind, the meditative, anticipatory quality that a journey to an unknown destination affords. It's no coincidence: *Colossus* has served as a "touchstone" for *Vane*, says Smith, with the team using composition and framing to both direct the camera and allow players a degree of control over the view.

Glints of light guide the way in lieu of objective markers. "They have a bigger tendency to show up at glancing angles; they'll show up in the periphery rather than when you're looking straight at them," says former 3D game-design teacher and current illustrator **Ivar Dahlberg**. Indeed, they catch the corners of the eyes as we fly, an invitation to veer around and swoop down to one of the game's weather vanes, which are hung with sparkly beads and indicate interactive areas. "The glint started as a way of saying, how ▶



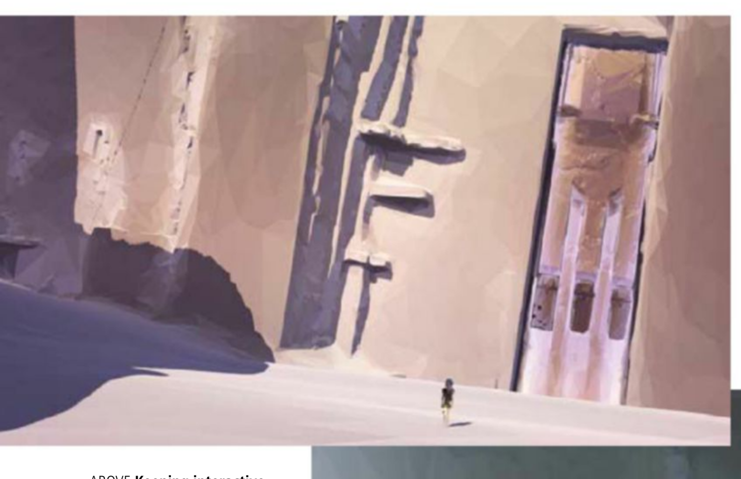




From top: Rasmus Deguchi, Matt Smith and Ivar Dahlberg



ABOVE **Structures such as weather vanes serve as waypoints, but actually landing is tricky: Smith admits that the current state of the mechanic is "infuriatingly bad".**
LEFT **Environments in *Vane* range from the natural to the industrial. We can't help but wonder if the strange electrical storm shown is responsible for these markedly bleak landscapes**









ABOVE **Keeping interactive elements subtle yet readable is a challenge for the team. Spotting a good old-fashioned crate has us realise we can push and pull certain objects while human.** TOP RIGHT **Huge climbs are sometimes thwarted by odd camera angles and sticky controls. At least falling is beautiful, our hero turning into a raven mid-tumble.** MAIN **Synths lend drama and dread to discoveries of new locations. "Once you play through the whole game, the soundtrack becomes significantly more appropriate," says Smith. "It starts out as a dissonant feature, but we're pretty confident that it helps the world come into its own."** BELOW LEFT **Achingly vast caverns underneath the earth suggest the ruins of a lost world. Inside, we find more ravens and rivers of the strange golden substance that transforms our character into a human.** BELOW RIGHT **We start out alone in our demo, but are soon swooping around with groups of fellow birds. The flocking mechanic was originally a key part of *Vane*'s puzzles, but proved too finicky for players**



do we do a HUD without doing a HUD?" says Smith. "We wanted to keep it grounded in the world. But we've found they're almost overpowered, because the environment doesn't speak as well. It winds up being a 'hunt the sparkles' game, which isn't what we're looking for." Dahlberg agrees: "Ideally, we want to have a world pulling you into it with the sheer beauty or interest of the environment itself."

While the section of the world in our demo is vast, it is stark. Flat stretches of dry, yellow earth do little to inspire: at times, our raven's flight over it is just slow enough to counter the curiosity drawing us to the next sparkle. When we arrive, mysteries unfold, then shrink into themselves again. Diving into crevasses leads to shivering piles of iridescent gold. Up close, they cause our feathers to splinter and shudder, then disappear as we emerge from the substance in human form. In one instance, a puzzle is briefly obvious as we release a raven trapped in a cage with the help of some slightly clunky platforming.

But these places guard their secrets jealously: it's not clear what the next step is. Another gold-flooded cavern elsewhere in the stage seems for all the world a red herring. Again, a sense of wonder is tinged with frustration. "The game has elements of puzzles in it, but it's not one big puzzle that you need to figure out," Deguchi says. "It's more an experience where each individual interaction can stand on its own. With some things, you get a more immediate reward for figuring something out, and other things tie into a bigger chain of events." We're still unconvinced that small cavern has a purpose – but we assume our liberated friend is part of something bigger, and irritation melts away into a desire to explore again.

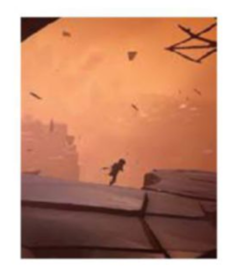
It is the bright glints of hope – mechanical and otherwise – that draw us on, or cause us to circle back to crumbling landmarks and dark holes, in case we've missed something. A turquoise oasis, fittingly, offers some welcome relief from the parched expanse. This time, however, it's the tricky process of landing on a windsock that nearly cheats us of a moment with an unkindness of ravens. It adds an involving skill-based facet to *Vane*; it could also be seen to contradict the game's atmosphere. "We have that debate all the time, and that's the reason why that mechanic is a schizophrenic mess," Smith says. "We want to have some depth to it, but something we've learned is sometimes we let that depth become the mission, instead of the mission being the player experiencing the world."

And while it's not exactly early days for *Vane* (it was announced at Tokyo Game Show in 2014), development is still in its infancy. Friend & Foe is attempting to perform a parlous balancing act between mystery and clarity. What lodges itself in the mind and under the skin, though, is that vibe, perhaps most evident in our demo's opening scene. We are a weakling in an improbable world, avoiding lightning strikes and stumbling over ground as distorted as the synthesiser accompaniment. The sense of doom is palpable.

In these moments, *Vane* moves further from the easy Team Ico comparison into something far stranger. We ask about a a previous build, which showed this scene at a different point in the demo. "I don't want to get into that," Smith says. "The structure was special to [that show]. Ultimately, it's not super important *when* those things happen..." Finally, some illumination escapes through a crack in the veneer of vagueness. "This is a game that has a unique relationship with time – time, space, and location. It's something that may not make perfect sense to you right when you encounter something, but we want the mysteries to resolve over time into more ideas. As you finish it and play through again, it comes into better focus.

"This is a game that has a unique relationship with time – time, space, and location"

"We want it to stick with you. Not as a cool story, but an affecting experience. That sense of mystery is key," Smith says. "Maybe the mystery is solved, but not in the way you expect, and you can't really explain what the resolution was. Maybe it's not easy to put how you felt about it into words." We note that this is a writer's idea of hell. Smith laughs. "It might be our idea of hell, too." ■



Logged off

There's a paradox at the heart of *Vane*'s development. Friend & Foe has displayed a willingness to be open about the game's creation, suggested by a handful of dev blogs on their website. But the updates have ground to a halt. "We like to share what we're doing," says Dahlberg. "But we constantly run into this thing of, 'Is this something that we can tell at this point?' Because we might ruin the experience for someone." Smith chimes in: "Almost any game is a process of discovery. Where the discovery process is more systematic, like in our other game *Dangerous Men*, that's a lot easier to share. For a game like *Vane*, much can be spoiled. We want to avoid that. In the modern era, it's almost a fool's errand – but it's something that's still important to us, to preserve that as much as possible."



LOST SPHEAR

I Am Setsuna's spiritual successor challenges its player and its past

Developer Tokyo RPG Factory
Publisher Square Enix
Format PC, PS4, Switch
Origin Japan
Release January 23

The bitter winds of snow-driven JRPG *I Am Setsuna* were harsh; its battles, less so. Players quickly realised certain powerful skills and combos could drop enemies in mere moments. As a wistful nod to the good old days – *Chrono Trigger*, *Final Fantasy VI* and so on – it made a case for itself through sheer charm. Tokyo RPG Factory's follow-up pays similar homage to the greats, but is also freshly determined to set some ants among the nostalgic picnic.

While *I Am Setsuna* subtly tweaked the Active Time Battle System made popular by *Chrono Trigger*, *Lost Sphear* has made a more drastic change, letting you freely move party members around the battlefield. The tactical depth this adds is distinct. When our party runs across a clutch of Mories in a nearby forest, our thoughts are as much on positioning as they are on combinations of attacks. We can now, for instance, send tough-gloved Lumina sprinting around the back line to hit a whole cluster of the angry green parrot-creatures at once. Locke's crossbow, meanwhile, requires some light geometry: if we move him to the top of the screen, we're able to catch four enemies in our line of fire. And these are basic attacks to boot – characters' regular blows can often hit across more squares than their indicators might suggest, and, coupled with this new range of realtime motion, there's more utility and creativity to be wrung out of the battle system than ever.

The constant reevaluations of a highly changeable battlefield force a proactive approach: in *Setsuna*, you'd simply have to hope foes would move into vulnerable groups of their own accord. Here, the result is akin to a mildly stressful game of bowling, setting them up with hero Kanata's defense-lowering skill, then knocking several down with a well-placed blow. Even this introductory Mory encounter is somewhat tense, since these small feathery nuisances hit decently hard. Fortunately, *I Am Setsuna*'s Momentum system returns to lend a hand, as you boost damage with a timely tap of a face button before an attack fires. Liberal, irrelevant applications of the prefix 'Setsuna' also feature. Our shrine maiden hasn't been forgotten just yet.

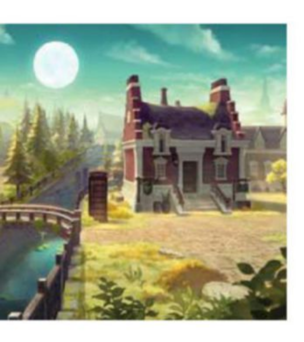
But the continuation of *Setsuna*'s spirit, if not its story, is welcome. Kanata's home town of Elgarthe is a delight to explore: delicate lighting and showers of autumn leaves depict a warmer melancholy than *Setsuna*'s snowy island. There's change in ▶





Scarf-wearing hero Kanata is backed up by feisty brawler Lumina, loveable idiot Locke (who is hooked out of a lake in the fishing tutorial) and the mysterious silver-haired Van





the air. Nevertheless, the village is bustling with life and little stories: the universally beloved innkeeper; the kid patiently teaching his pet tricks; the deadbeat husband who spends too much time in the sauna to escape his in-laws. A giant bell serves as a warning when monsters attack, and comically named dogs play in the streets. Soon, however, Elgarthe and everyone in it will disappear, whole chunks of the game's overworld falling into a white void. Only our hero Kanata can return these forgotten parts of the world, using memory fragments recovered from battling enemies.

The caveat of *Lost Sphear*'s flexible combat is that bosses are cannier, using your poor positioning against you. A later battle against bow-wielding warrior Sherra and her two gorilla-esque guards is punishing, even at a lofty level 18. When we unconsciously move our characters into a tempting line, Sherra fires off a charmed arrow attack, bewitching three of our four party members. The unfortunate Van is duly knocked out, and a restart soon follows imminent. Our next run at the fight is more carefully spaced, as we hit all three enemies with long-range attacks as often as possible (Kanata has an area-of-effect skill that can lower multiple foes' defence, which proves essential) and keep our heroes separated. A scattered formation, however, spells disaster for AOE healing efforts. Things are tense, our decision-making swift and not always correct – and here, at least, there's no single overpowered attack to lean on.

Suiting up one character and keeping them close to the enemy works well

We suppose there are the mech suits, though, great clanking piles of metal that can turn your dinky warriors into supercharged robot terrors on a whim. The Vulcosuits are more balanced than they sound, however. Pressing the left bumper transforms one or all of your party into mecha, each with a different and more powerful set of attacks and skills. Higher defence properties mean they're a great option for your wounded characters to retreat to. Potential balance issues are mitigated by a Vulcopoints meter: using the suits and their abilities in combat rapidly drains the team's shared charge. As long as the items that must be found to charge the meter aren't too plentiful, this mechanical curiosity is set to add a new layer of strategy to *Lost Sphear*'s combat. Suiting up one character and keeping them close to the enemy to tank big hits works well.

We also quickly learn the benefits of transforming a single character with a specific skill, at certain points in more difficult battles, to conserve meter – although the quick thinking and forward planning required will doubtless take further getting used to. There are reasons to hop into Vulcosuits during exploration sections, too: meter can be spent to rocket-boost your party through areas and past enemy encounters, and sometimes we find that we need the extra clout to break through tough obstacles in our path. The whole situation feels slightly off, tonally. In our demo, at least, it's never explained why Kanata and friends can instantly morph into robots like it's the most natural thing in the world. Then again, it's preferable to the appearance of 'moral choice' events later on. Though they are, admittedly, removed from the context of the full game, choosing to save or spare certain copy-pasted soldiers you've defeated feels half-hearted in its execution.

Combat refreshes and some melancholic mecha aside, *Lost Sphear* is mostly rather familiar. But, as the name implies, Tokyo RPG Factory is a studio knowingly carving out a nostalgic niche for itself – and, on this evidence, doing an excellent job of it. *Lost Sphear* is making a strong case for the relevance of the quietly accomplished, retro-style JRPG in a market of bombastic action. It's a product of both *Setsuna*'s failures and successes – its classic spirit arguing that we shouldn't forget the past, lest we lose what makes it so special. ■





Pep talk

A new Party Chat feature promises to add some colour to roaming the lands of *Lost Sphear*. Located on the right bumper, it'll call an impromptu pow-wow with your team members. The function is partially a way to offer players struggling to remember what they should do next: activating the function will have characters remind Kanata of the current objective, or a new area they need to explore. But it's also about getting to know your buddies' backstories and motivations in further detail and depth. Lumina ends her introduction of the feature with a suggestion: "Once in a while, let's just have a nice chat."



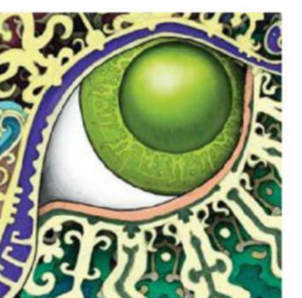




TOP ***Lost Sphear*'s locales are more varied than *I Am Setsuna*'s, with woodland, caverns, industrial cities and, presumably, big mysterious pyramid structures.** ABOVE ***Setsuna*'s Magic Consortium returns, selling skills called spritnites for a chunk of collected memories. Potentiate is the most useful, allowing an item such as a healing potion to affect the whole group.** LEFT **Van's regular attack is a long-range laser. Here, we'd suggest moving him to the bottom of the screen before firing it through the line of four enemies on the right.** BOTTOM **Having just one fighter wear a Vulcosuit conserves VP. This can be a good defensive move if a particular party member is a little low on health**

Developer Buried Signal
Publisher Annapurna Interactive
Format PC, Mac, iOS, Android
Origin US
Release 2017





GOROGOA

This picturesque fairytale puzzler conjures up something entirely new for the genre

Jason Roberts' puzzle game has been a long time in the making – six years, in fact. But nobody could accuse the developer of dragging his heels. From the design, to the programming, to the exquisite hand-drawn illustrations, everything is the work of Roberts himself. Such is his commitment to beauty and quality in *Gorogoa* that the player's every click both looks and feels like artistry.

Your view of Roberts' watercolour world is provided via a picture window: a grid of four comic book-style panels. Through the panes, a dragon-like creature with colourful filigree fins winds through architecture, the obsession of our protagonist. But your role extends beyond mere onlooker: moving through this fairytale is a delightful process of framing and reframing. Often, each panel exists in a different period of time, an alternate place, or both, meaning you need to pinpoint and build points of connection between them.

Its density of quality suggests the magic won't last more than a couple of hours

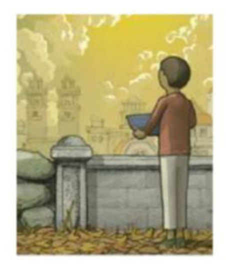
To zoom in closer on select parts of a scene, you simply click, and watch as new details come into focus: a shiny red apple growing on a tree, for instance, and a bowl in another. A quick click and drag aligns one half of the branch with a second, the lines between all three panels melt away, and the apple falls into the bowl. Our purpose is to pluck five different fruits from within the memories of our protagonist – they will be an offering of some kind to the mysterious Gorogoa.

Things quickly get trickier than winning the apple. As the protagonist's experiences telescope into themselves and out again, we find ourselves forced to mentally juggle the contents of every time-hopping layer to figure out solutions. And as the story unfolds, so do *Gorogoa*'s mechanics. Puzzles progress from asking you to line up adjacent panels to requiring fanciful feats of logic from the player. Your ability to manipulate the comic panels broadens to accommodate this. Reshuffling frames gives way to more complex tasks: pulling layers apart, for example, to use an element elsewhere or create a space in which something else can slot – a sparkling star into a lightless lamp, perhaps.

There's a risk that some players might get lost along such long, complex paths. Fortunately, the moments of struggle in *Gorogoa*'s demo are often enough to be challenging, but short-lived enough not to frustrate – and significant enough to feel rewarding. After six years of polish and thought, the UI is subtle yet powerful: pulses hint at interactive parts of panels when you click non-interactive areas, gently guiding the attention. Sounds, too, provide clues: a mechanical whirring in one scene suggests something unexpected, when reframed, might be the cog we need to move forward.

One brainteaser involving a shelf feels a little too obscure: the rather arbitrary solution we arrive at shows the puzzle is clumsily communicated. For the most part, however, *Gorogoa* makes us feel like an ingenious and imaginative observer, winkling out the multiple talents of each gorgeous piece of set-dressing. Locations range from the mundane to the miraculous: dreams of mountain pilgrimages, gardens and stained glass provide escape from dark, desperate rooms.

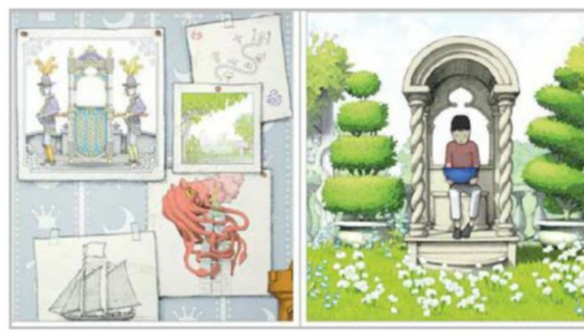
Its abstraction means it's unlikely the story will be sewn up traditionally and neatly, and its density of quality suggests the magic won't last more than a couple of hours. It won't be to everyone's taste: certainly, Annapurna tends to back the riskier horse. But this is thoroughbred stuff – indeed, there are shades of Annapurna stablemate *What Remains Of Edith Finch*, in the way its tale is told through continually fresh mechanical means. It may end up as the humble result of a mammoth development cycle, but so far, it's proof that you can't rush art. ■



Frank Einstein

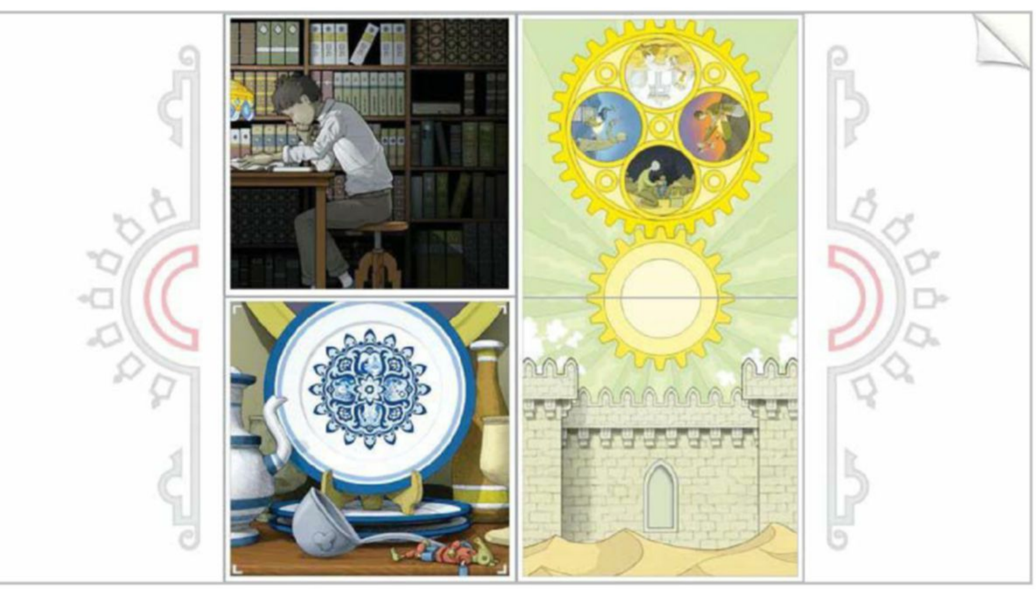
If you've been leafing through the dictionary to puzzle out what exactly the word Gorogoa means, then you can stop now: it's a term of Jason Roberts' own creation. As the game doesn't use text, Roberts wanted to call his project something that had no meaning in any recorded language. So, too, is the creature the word Gorogoa describes – a figment of his own childhood imagination. Indeed, there appears to be a possibility that *Gorogoa* is a somewhat autobiographical work for Roberts: he has previously noted his desire to represent the more spiritual aspects of his own self, his personal search for missing things and meaning, in this wordless tale.







TOP **One of *Gorogoa*'s more complex puzzles. A separate scene lives inside each of the three trinkets in the bottom-left panel.**
ABOVE **Colour is often used to guide the attention to related elements in different squares**









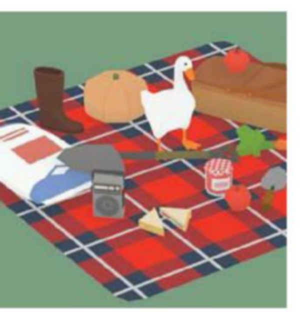


TOP **The tale makes getting lost in the imagination a reality, as you hop through daydreams and drawings to chase the creature.**
ABOVE **Roberts' art is often intricate enough to obscure solutions. Here, the plate's patterns hide further puzzles.**
LEFT **Earlier hints are fairly obvious. Your powers of observation are tested more rigorously later on, once you're more comfortable with the curious new format**



Developer/publisher House House
Format PC
Origin Australia
Release 2018





UNTITLED GOOSE GAME

A feathery 'joke simulator' that's surely billed for success

The goose game started as a joke: a silly Slack conversation between House House's development team. "I don't think any of us took it seriously," says **Nico Disseldorp**, developer. "But none of the other game ideas we were talking about had us as excited. We said, 'Obviously we can't make that one.' But each time it came up, we'd make ourselves laugh. And now it turns out this weird joke that we thought only we would find funny has really resonated."

Blindsided by a huge reaction so soon after the game's announcement, they haven't even had a chance to decide on a final title, let alone most of the game's content. Not that it matters, given its universally recognisable and hilarious core concept: geese are feathery little gits. The aim of the game is to waddle around terrorising the inhabitants of a quaint English village. Menacing a bumbling groundskeeper, for instance, means using cunning and creativity to steal his flat cap, or nab his sandwiches and drop them in a lake.

A radio serves as a distraction; a handy bush, cover. "Once we added people into the game, we saw these cartoon scenarios," says Disseldorp. "It kind of felt like stealth was the missing half of the joke – this idea that one person on the screen, and the viewer, knows something that the other person doesn't." **Jake Strasser**, also developing the game, chimes in: "We're borrowing elements from the stealth genre to create something more free-flowing and forgiving than, say, *Hitman*." Fellow developer **Stuart Gillespie-Cook** nods: "When you find an assassin in your midst, you can't just shoo it out of the garden and hope it doesn't come back."

Instafail situations aren't an option here, then – a good thing. If the victim of your key-pinching antics spots you, they'll simply become endearingly flustered, flapping you away and eventually returning to their business. "It feels natural for things to go back to normal," says Disseldorp. "Having a character built around this non-violent conflict takes away a lot of design problems that stealth games often have." There's a tick-list of objectives, although they're not the main focus. "We've been discussing how much to include as tasks, and how much to let a person find their own fun," says Gillespie-Cook.

There's no in-game suggestion to helpfully pop the groundskeeper's carrots into a nearby box for him, but the option is there. "There's a reason that we prefer 'horrible goose' over 'arsehole goose'," says Disseldorp. "You're more amoral than immoral."

Ultimately, your mission is to get a laugh, whether it's out of yourself or whoever's watching. "It's a fun game to act in," says Disseldorp. "Lots of the buttons we put in because we felt it would make it more fun to perform in front of friends: spreading your wings, or honking." There will be other village inhabitants to pester – although the details are still being decided – and probably a co-op mode. "We questioned whether we should show two geese together in the trailer, because it does set us up for something," says Strasser. "I think Nico's line was, 'Oh, no one's really going to see this.'" Nico laughs: "A couple of million views later, we're asking ourselves, what *does* it mean that there are two geese in there?"

> ***"When you find an assassin in your midst, you can't just shoo it out of the garden"***

But the team is keen not to let the warm initial reception change their modest plans. "It was a real wrestle for the few days after it blew up to stick to our guns," says Gillespie-Cook. "The version of the game that was going to be best before the trailer came out is probably still the best plan now," says Disseldorp. The goose game started as a joke – and really, the final product won't need to be much more than that. The punchline alone will make it well worth a gander. ■



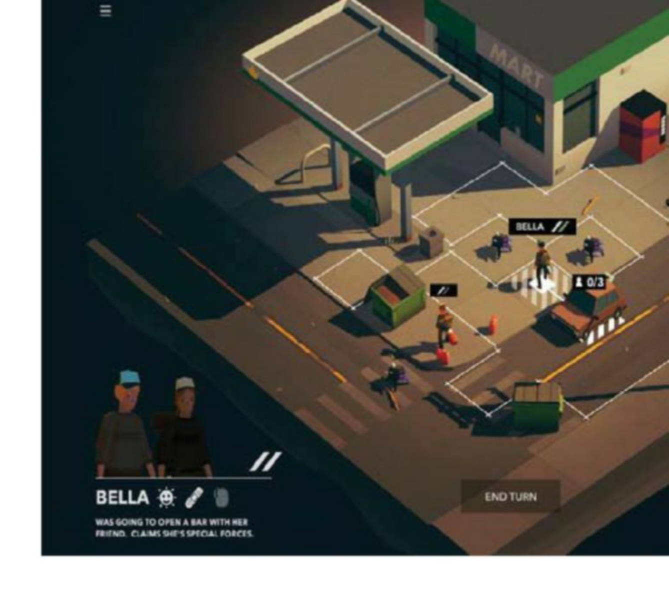
Trying goslings

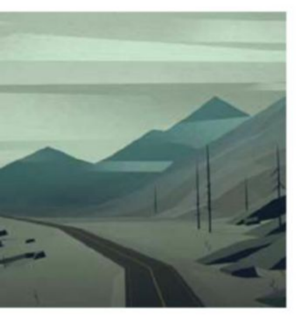
Clearly, House House holds bird-based grudges. Our questions turn up some chilling anecdotes. "When I was maybe two or three, I got into a fight with a pelican," says Gillespie-Cook. "I tried to kick it and it stole my gumboot off my foot and ran away with it." Strasser has also suffered some goose-adjacent trauma: "When I was little, my parents took me to a zoo in Melbourne – it had Australian native animals in it," he says. "I got chased around by this duck in this enclosure. We realised I was just completely dressed the same colour as it, my clothes and the cap I was wearing. It really didn't like me." If we can't make Untitled Goose Game's villages wear bird costumes to trigger a higher 'Rage mode' difficulty, we'll be disappointed.

TOP **While your cunning is your greatest asset, you can also spread your wings and honk to elicit reactions.**
ABOVE **British TV has been a key resource: Wallace and Gromit, and an episode of Brum involving "a big day out in the park," says Gillespie-Cook. "There are four or five direct references from that 20 minutes of children's TV in this game."**
LEFT **Having the setting be a fussy British village rather than a laid-back Aussie town "makes a goose in their midst much funnier", says Disseldorp.**
BOTTOM **Soaking the groundskeeper is a multi-step task that requires misdirection and creativity**



Developer/publisher Finji
Format PC, PS4, Vita
Origin US
Release TBA





OVERLAND

Finji's survival strategy title turns tension into apocalyptic adventure

Occasionally, *Overland* has a bit of an interface problem. Our van is filled with fuel, our four party members hunting for supplies across a gridded area. Monsters slowly surround us. A huge one thumps our van, causing smoke to start pouring from it. No problem – we've stored a toolbox on top of it. But click, curse and try as we might, we can't get Bennie to use it. The vehicle blows up, two of our party die, and the other two stagger on to their death in the next area. It hardly seems fair.

Then again, the cruelty of it is fitting, given this turn-based survival strategy game's premise. An unknown event has triggered a disaster, and neon-quilled man-eaters have infested America. Each individual, procedurally generated level has your survivors scavenging, fighting and making friends on a dangerous road trip out west. Every encounter is teeth-grindingly tense: actions per turn are limited, forcing you to constantly balance risk against reward. Dense 6x6 grids, scant resources, limited personal inventories and two-hit kills ensure your group's level of safety ranges from 'moderate peril' to 'imminent death'.

Difficulty is key, says **Adam Saltsman**, developer and Finji co-founder. "I was playing *XCOM: Enemy Unknown* on Ironman mode: when you play on the easier setting, you miss out. It felt like learning a new sport or something." It was Adam's experiences with *XCOM* and turn-based title *868-Hack* that inspired *Overland*: "One was a colossal, squad-based game with huge possibilities, and the other this compact, minimalist, 'every step is life or death' type of game. We said, 'Wouldn't it be cool if we could have some of the best parts of an *XCOM* experience in five minutes, instead of an hour?'"

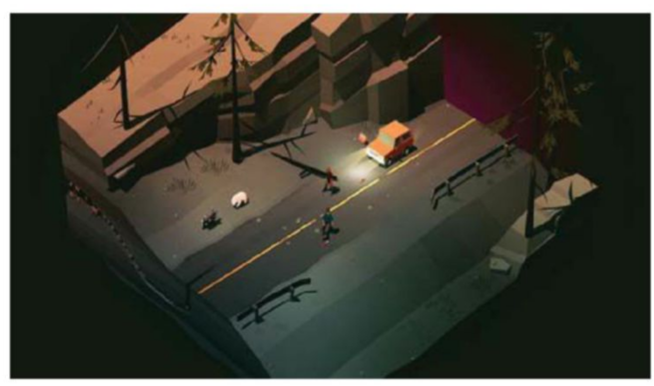


ABOVE **Dumpsters hold useful loot – there's something you don't hear every day – but they can also block your vehicle's escape route. You'll need to tell a party member to drag it out of the way before the creatures arrive**

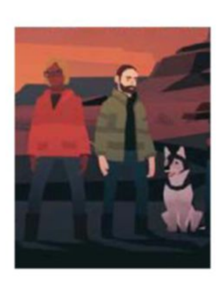
Abandoned cars can help you evade danger in unexpected ways. Sliding through its seats in one turn both gets you away from a pursuer and puts an obstacle between them and you

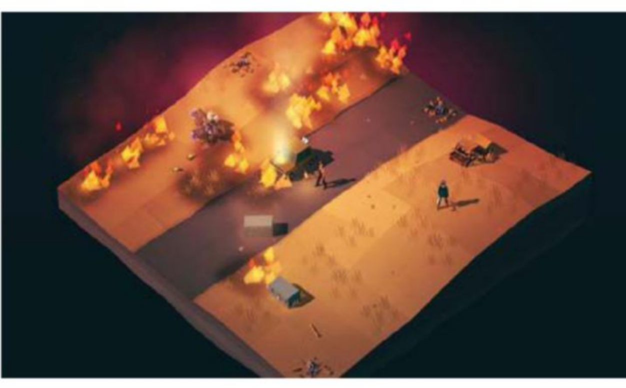






LEFT **Your canine party members can also attack monsters, search containers and carry an item in their mouths. Unsurprisingly, they can't use said items – or operate a motor vehicle**





TOP LEFT **Petrol stations offer a chance to fill your fuel reserves to the top, but they're usually crawling with monsters. A full party of four struggles to find safety.** ABOVE **As you might expect, it's wise to exercise caution when moving gas canisters around near flaming barrels. Then again, setting a party member on fire makes for a useful distraction in a pinch, if you've the stomach for it**

And, toolbox fumblings aside, it's close to that lofty goal. A stylish, simplified UI belies a systemic depth that creates unique scenarios out of incremental decisions. The longer you stay in one area, or the more noise you make, the more monsters sprout from beneath the earth to attack. "We try to build the risk/reward decisions for drama and close calls," Saltsman says. "Abilities and monsters are balanced around giving players cool opportunities to escape." Indeed, sending the wounded Ellis a step too far for a medkit in one stage almost leaves him stranded when he runs out of action points – until we realise we can use someone in the car to pull him in.

When it all works, it's slicker than most interfaces in the genre. But following our explosive undoing, we worry *Overland*'s minimal UI might work against us at critical moments. An 'undo' button lets you reverse a misclick, but the issue here is more complex. "We didn't realise until partway into making the game that strategy games are *all* user interface," Saltsman says. "About 50 percent of our work has gone into just trying to figure out where the buttons go and what they do." Around half of *Overland*'s 'first access' players have experienced the toolbox disaster, says Saltsman: it's not obvious in what order items and squares should be clicked to fix your ride.

The right kind of stress is a thrill, and *Overland* has plenty of it so far. In fact, players are crying out for more opportunities for quietude. Finji is listening, softening *Overland* at points: when it's raining, creatures won't call reinforcements, and remote hoarder camps will offer a place to regroup and resupply, provided you can save enough fuel to get there. "More players than I expected found earlier versions to be relentless," Saltsman says.

A game so clever at punishing errors with the death of a beanie-wearing optimist or a beloved dog perhaps isn't everybody's cup of tea. No doubt keen strategists will be up to the challenge, but there's plenty here for the braver, more narratively driven: daring escapes and meaningful sacrifices. As clumsy as its UI can be, *Overland*'s communications of human nature are eerily accurate. But as development has rolled on, Saltsman has struggled with the game's dark premise. "It's a little weird to work on now, because we started it almost four years ago in a world that seemed a little less [immediately] pre-apocalyptic," he says. "It was very much intended as an escapist thing, like, 'Oh, imagine if real folks were having to contemplate the end of the world.'

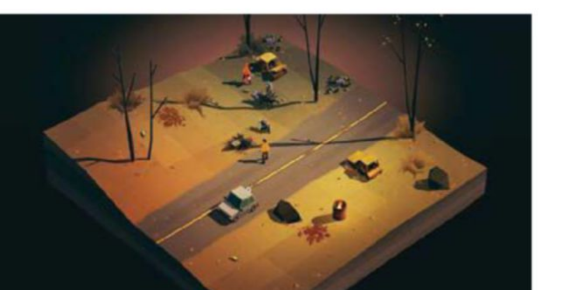
"Back then, that was something that wasn't part of my life. I was born too late: the impact of the Cold War was background radiation, but not constantly there. And now..." He pauses. "I don't know. I feel like if I was starting a new game design right now, it'd probably be a little different." ■

"We started it four years ago in a world that seemed a little less pre-apocalyptic"

Bend it like Bentham

Finji has designed the building blocks that make up *Overland*'s characters carefully to encourage player attachment. All of the character art was redone, Saltsman tells us: "They used to be very austere, *Kentucky Route Zero*-inspired, low-poly faces. We thought players would project themselves onto them, but it turns out that's super wrong. It helps if they're a little bit cute. We want players to feel like they're protecting them." But Finji doesn't want to completely discourage some utilitarian sacrifices in the name of progress. A rehaul of the current game-over screen may help: "It will show 3D models of everyone you met along the way, an overview of how far you made it, and little story badges about who travelled the furthest or who's a murderer."

You'll have to greet other stranded survivors before you can add them to your party and control their movements. They're often carrying handy items, too



PSYCHONAUTS 2

Developer Double Fine Productions **Publisher** Starbreeze Studios **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Origin** US **Release** 2018



At last, a progress update for Double Fine's platformer sequel, which on this evidence might just reach us before the end of next year as planned. A pre-alpha build of a quarry area just outside Psychonauts HQ is not only much larger than anything in the original, but features some proper platforming, with branches to swing from, trampolines to bounce off and gaps to double-jump across. Raz's Thought Bubble ability is back, letting him roll along on a ball of psychic energy, or float down safely from high platforms. And if you're after a test subject for your telekinetic powers, well, there are plenty of goats about the place.

NOUR

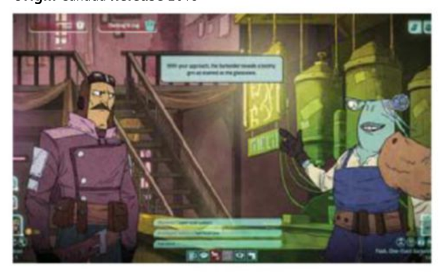
Developer/publisher Terrifying Jellyfish
Format PC **Origin** US **Release** April



And to think we were always taught not to play with our food. *Nour*'s crowdfunding success suggests a strong appetite for its experimental approach to the art of culinary preparation. Tap buttons on a keyboard or MIDI controller to make corn kernels pop and ramen noodles slop. Elsewhere, you can lob tapioca balls and straws into cups of bubble tea, or shower sugar sprinkles onto scoops of ice cream nestling in a bathtub. Mouthwatering stuff.

GRIFTLANDS

Developer/publisher Klei Entertainment **Format** PC
Origin Canada **Release** 2018



Making a fortune in a world of mercenaries forces you to pick your allies carefully in Klei's handsome space-pirate RPG. Team morale and personality traits are as crucial as traditional combat skills in the turn-based skirmishes, where fights usually end in surrender rather than death.

WARGROOVE

Developer/publisher Chucklefish **Format** PC, Switch, Xbox One
Origin UK **Release** Early 2018



Chucklefish's *Advance Wars* homage now has a versatile editor for players to create their own custom maps and campaigns. Beyond the expected features, event triggers are the big draw, letting you set ambushes, determine victory conditions, and even change the rules of engagement.

POKÉMON ULTRA SUN & MOON

Developer Game Freak **Publisher** The Pokémon Company
Format 3DS **Origin** Japan **Release** November



What seemed a stopgap to keep fans sweet until the first Switch entry appears to be more than just a quick fix. Along with new areas of the Alolan region to explore, you can ride waves in a surfing minigame or travel further afield, warping through wormholes to fight three new Ultra Beasts.

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VIDEOGAME CULTURE, DEVELOPMENT, PEOPLE AND TECHNOLOGY





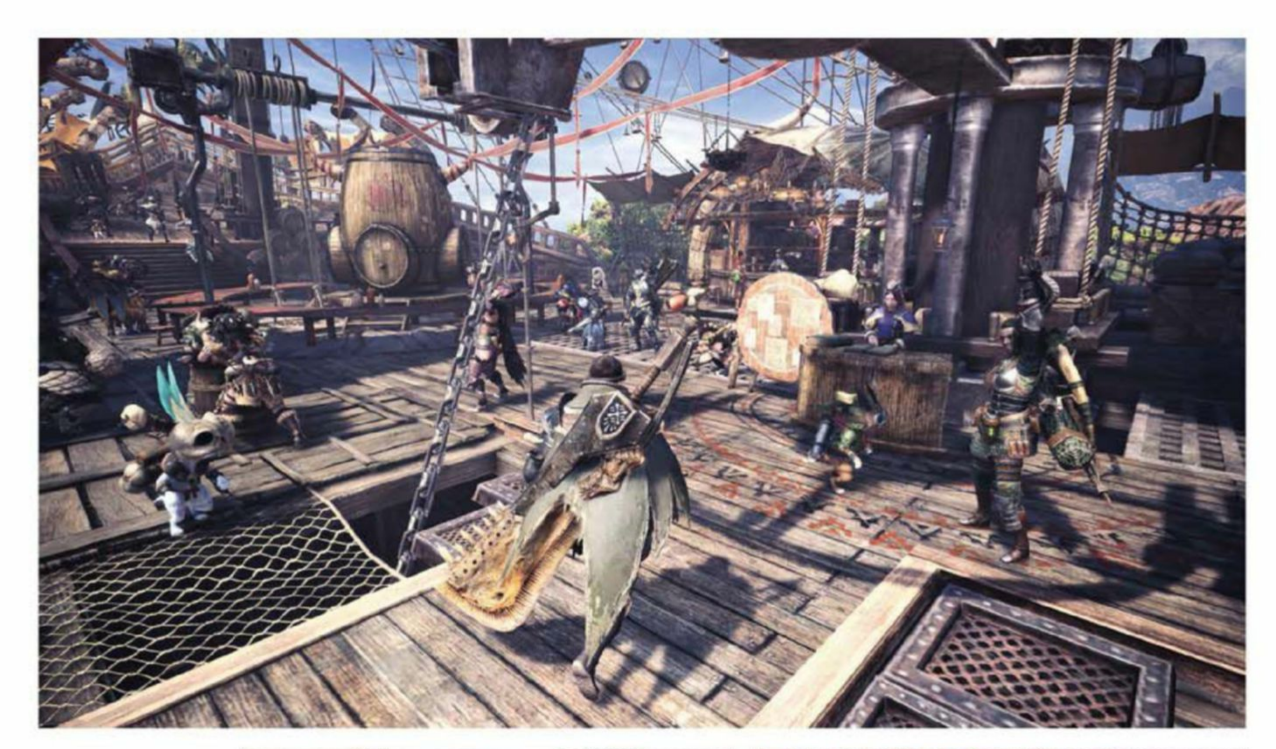
GLOBAL DOMINATION

How Monster Hunter plans to move from hardcore pursuit to worldwide phenomenon

By Nathan Brown



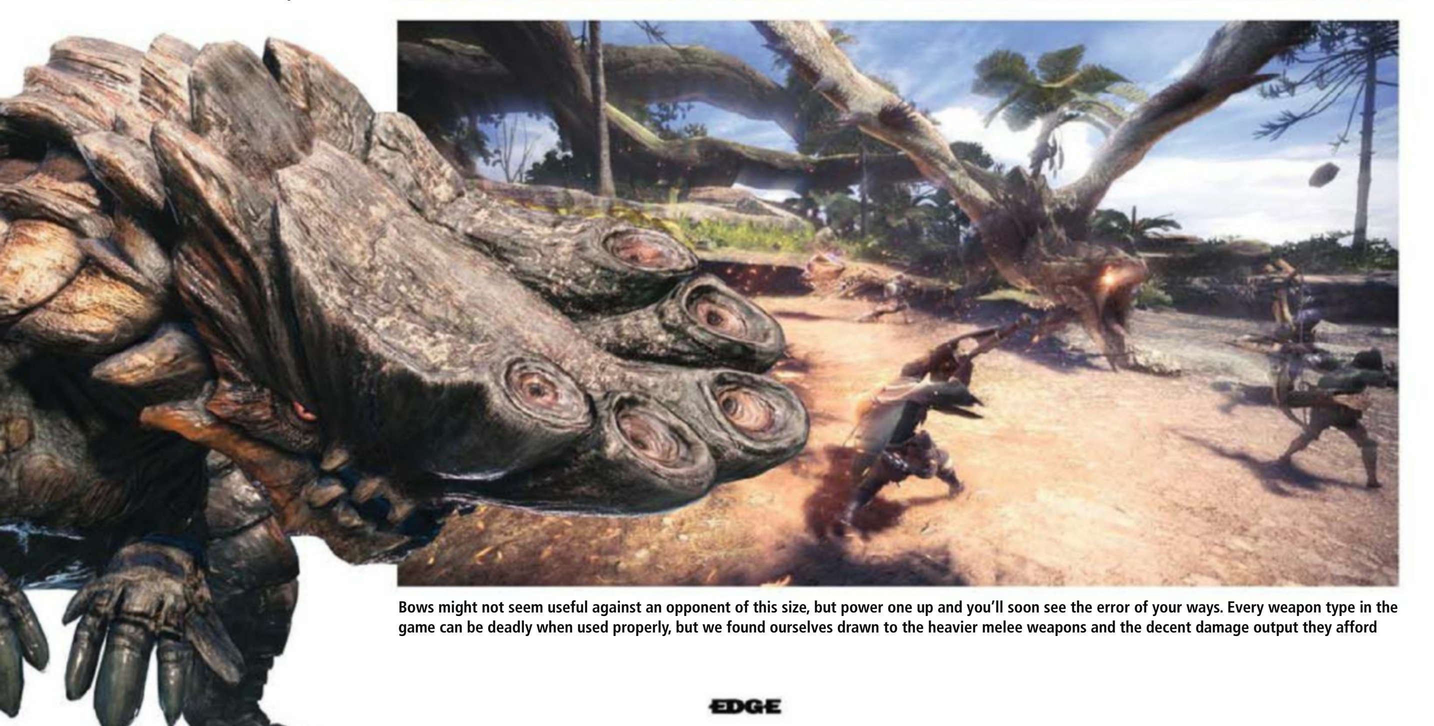
Game *Monster Hunter: World*
Developer/publisher Capcom
Format PS4, Xbox One
Release January 26



ABOVE **Astera, the hub, is a multi-layered place; early on it's easy to get lost looking for a particular merchant or quest giver.** RIGHT **Once you find a monster's location, it's unlikely to stay there. Wound it, and it'll run away.** FAR RIGHT **Crafting, forging and eating are heralded with short cutscenes which, annoyingly, are exactly the same every time**







Bows might not seem useful against an opponent of this size, but power one up and you'll soon see the error of your ways. Every weapon type in the game can be deadly when used properly, but we found ourselves drawn to the heavier melee weapons and the decent damage output they afford



PERHAPS MOST VITALLY, AFTER ONLY A COUPLE OF HOURS, BEGINNER PLAYERS ARE ABLE TO PARTY UP WITH FRIENDS

There are two types of *Monster Hunter* player: those who adore it, and those that have never played it. The latter camp have dabbled, perhaps; they've heard the fuss, have been assured that, once they get into it, they'll never look back. But they've always bounced off it before the fun really starts. The former group loved *Monster Hunter* warts and all – and boy, did it have some warts. It was slow, it was grindy, and thanks to its underpowered host hardware (the series has been largely built for handhelds), it was rather ugly, for all the beauty that lay beneath the low-res surface.

If those were some of the criteria that have long prevented this intoxicating series from reaching a widespread audience, *Monster Hunter: World* might just be the game that changes everything. The return to home-console hardware means a larger, more complex, and seamless world which is home to a believable ecosystem. The pace has been quickened dramatically, with an easy-to-follow intro that has you whaling away on a huge beast within the hour. And heavens above, it's a looker, a vibrant, varied fantasy action-RPG with a sense of scale and ambition that were only ever hinted at by the boundaries of a PSP or 3DS screen.

"It's kind of a matter of timing," says producer **Ryuji Tsujimoto** of the decision to bring *Monster Hunter* back to home consoles, and the overhaul that decision has prompted. "We hope to see a large influx of new players to the series, and with that in mind, we've rebuilt *Monster Hunter* from the ground up: retaining the core gameplay, but starting from scratch on the framework of the game. This has meant we've been able to revisit certain design decisions – certain legacy aspects which we now have a chance to go back and do a better job of."

Well, mission accomplished. *Monster Hunter* kicks quickly into gear, and while it may not show its hand immediately, it at least does a much better job of hinting at what makes the series tick in its opening hours. And you learn not, as in the past, by reading reams of text. A short series of cinematics and fully voiced tutorials help set the scene, and ease you into proceedings. You quickly gain access to Astera, the hub town, and are introduced to its various quest givers and merchants. Perhaps most vitally, after only a couple of hours, beginner players are able to party up with friends. Gone is the old way of *Monster Hunter* thinking, where single- and multiplayer modes were hived off from each other early on; the story component was an offline pursuit, and those who bought the game and jumped straight into a co-op session would have no idea what was going on. "With very few exceptions," Tsujimoto tells us, "you can now progress through the storyline and learn how to play the game while playing with your friends in co-op. That's going to be a great, smoother on-ramp into the game for players whose expectations might be along those lines."

As Tsujimoto suggests, Capcom has gone to great lengths to update some of *Monster Hunter*'s fustier elements to accommodate the anticipated influx of beginner players. Yet it has equally striven to ensure that series die-hards do not feel short-changed by all the new tweaks. It's most purely expressed by your hunter's sprint manoeuvre, which is now mapped to two commands: the right bumper, in line with series veterans' muscle memory; and to a click of the left stick, in line with, well, everyone else's. Item selection has been similarly tweaked, retaining the long scrolling list of previous games, while adding a new radial menu which will be more familiar to novices. It's not that the *Monster Hunter* of old has been pushed to the side in a drive to boost sales; rather, the old has been supplemented by the new, and the flow of the early game optimised to ensure players no longer feel like they're a couple of dozen hours away from the meat of the thing. It works.

Well, most of the time. Chatting to a fellow member of the European press who's been invited to Capcom's Osaka HQ for a two-day session with *Monster Hunter: World*, we lament what we see as a clunky system for redeeming post-mission rewards. We're shown everything we've won, and must hit X over and over to collect them one by one. Could it not, we suggest, work from the assumption that we want everything we're entitled to, and manually select what we'd prefer to leave behind? Our colleague corrects us: this is actually a tremendous quality-of-life change for series fans. You used to have to select each item one by one using the D-pad, then press X to collect it.



"THERE'S A LOT OF POWER IN THESE CONSOLES, BUT YOU CAN'T JUST USE EVERYTHING ALL THE TIME"

There are other awkward legacies of the old days, many of them quirks of the long-standing *Monster Hunter* lexicon. You don't 'accept' or 'begin' a new quest from an Astera building board; you 'post' one. To confirm your selection and start said quest, you click a box marked 'finish'. The menus can still confound (are our completed bounties automatically redeemed, or should we do it manually?) and whoever put the one guy selling health-restoring potions on top of a tall stack of boxes in the bowels of Astera deserves the full wrath of Diablos. Some old habits die hard, then, but Capcom's overall mission is clear and, by and large, it's cracked it. Or posted it, perhaps.

In any case, once you're out in the field, such concerns quickly melt away. Another new addition, a swarm of scoutflies that highlight the critical path while bending away to alert you to nearby pickups and crafting supplies, proved divisive among a community of hunters that feared the presence of a breadcrumb trail would numb the thrill of the chase. Yet the swarm feels essential. First, you're not reduced to wandering these huge lands in the dim hope of stumbling upon your quarry. And more pertinently, the presence of a guiding hand means Capcom can be more creative than ever before in its approach to *Monster Hunter* level design. The central area of the Ancient Forest map, for example – one of two we see during our time with the game – is a multilayered rabbit warren of thick vines and climbing plants that we don't much fancy learning to navigate alone.

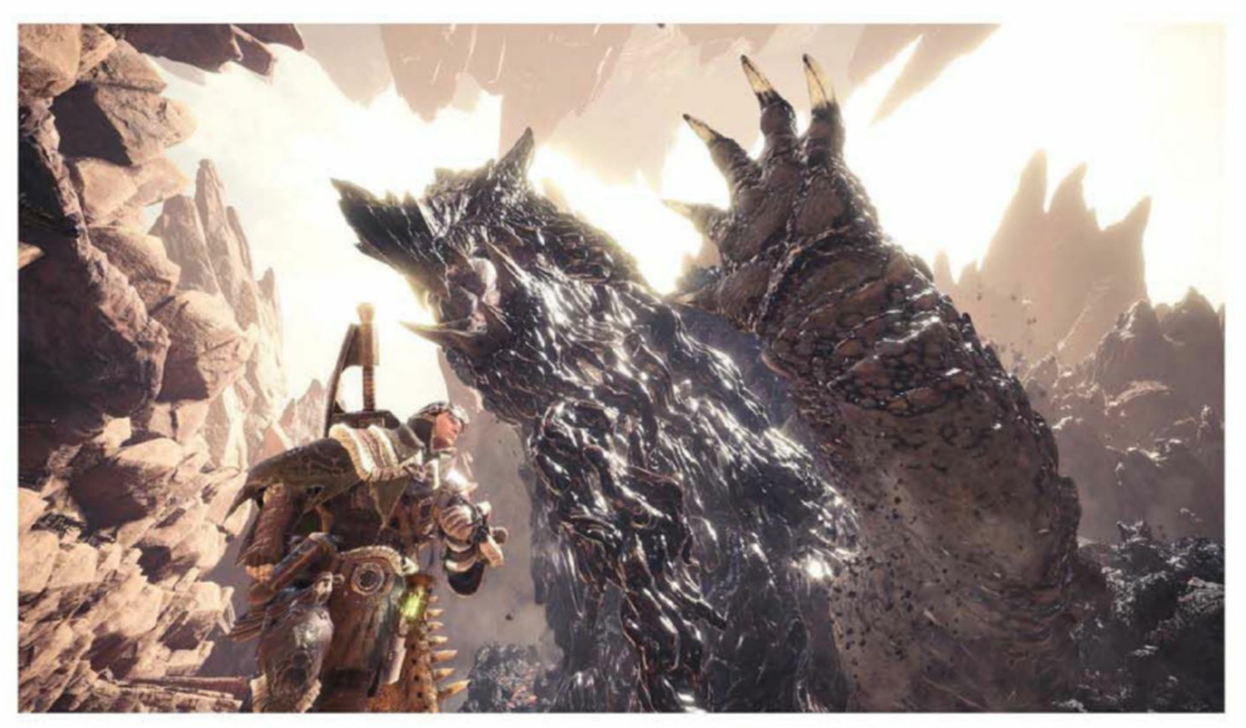
Ultimately, scoutflies are another pacing device, ensuring you get to the action quickly – but this is far from a quickfire game. The 50-minute timer on most quests makes that clear, especially once you account for the fact that your party members can only be knocked out (or 'faint') three times in total before you're booted back to Astera. Yes, you can find things quickly. But it's still going to take you a while to put them to the sword, or axe, or insect glaive. The third monster we face off against, Barroth, is a huge, armoured beast with a battering ram for a forehead. Our longsword hits it for a whopping eight damage points per swing; working solo, it takes us the best part of half an hour to finally put it down.

"We've always had really good monster AI and interesting stages," Tsujimoto says, "but being able to combine a very complex topological map with really intelligent monster behaviour, and interactions between monsters and smaller creatures, even plants… we saw a chance to make a rich, deep world."

This, to put it mildly, was no easy task. The *Monster Hunter* team has, after all, spent most of the past decade working on handheld systems; if it was to return to powerful console hardware, it would need more people, and extra help besides. Tsujimoto and team staffed up, focusing, he says, on younger and more international blood, who would be more familiar with modern development techniques (by virtue of *World*'s simultaneous worldwide release, localisation teams were on hand to deal with any communication issues that arose across language barriers). Capcom's internal R&D unit was an invaluable aid early on, helping the dev team work out what it could do, how it could do it, and how quickly it might see results. "There's a lot of power in these consoles," Tsujimoto says, "but you can't just use everything all the time."

"It wasn't just about using the hardware in obvious ways," lead artist **Sayaka Kenbe** tells us. "Sometimes it involved taking very roundabout methods to accomplish what we were trying to do. In the past, when implementing things like fur, we were very limited in what we could do. Now it's possible to get thousands and thousands of strands, but processing-wise it's impossible. So we figured out other methods to make it look like fur, make it look soft and natural." Despite all of Capcom's renewed ambition, the game has been made using the ageing MT Framework engine, though this immeasurably more complex game has almost no code in common with the 3DS games with which it shares a lineage, a legacy and an engine.

A turning point in *Monster Hunter: World*'s development was a prototype which didn't feature so much as a single sword. "It focused on the new parts of the game," Tsujimoto says. "There wasn't any hunting; it was more about seeing how the player would pick up a monster's scent, and then when you encountered it you could do various things: you could lure it to meet another monster so they could fight, for example. All the parts everyone has ▶



ABOVE **In a word: cripes. You can fire up a flare at this point to call for co-op help, though remember: there's no shame in running away.** RIGHT **Your room is where you can change your loadout, and even give character creation another try if you've realised some grave error.** FAR RIGHT **The Jyuratodos spits puddles of mud which will slow you if you pass through them**







This is one for the die-hards, assuring them that the notorious egg-stealing quests are present and correct despite the renewed focus on accessibility. Cooking will be invaluable, since among the buffs you get from eating is one that speeds your movement when carrying



FRAME PACING

Given Capcom's increasing use of Unreal Engine, and its struggles with maintaining its own technology (remember Panta Rhei?) it's with some surprise that a brief tour of the development floor reveals the team is building its new game in MT Framework. This, after all, is an engine that dates all the way back to the first *Dead Rising*; it's been heavily updated since, sure, but why did Capcom decide to use ageing tech for the most forward-thinking *Monster Hunter* to date? "We felt the best possible environment to create the game would be to have engineers on standby available to us, rather than having to rely on external resources," Tsujimoto says. "Moreover, there are some things you can only do in MT Framework that really benefit *Monster Hunter*. The series has really influenced the development of MT Framework, so the custom toolsets available in the engine suit *Monster Hunter* development really well. It really just made sense to stick with the engine which was made by, and which makes, *Monster Hunter*."









While typical Japan-industry secrecy means we're not given a full studio tour, we do glimpse staff at work. Above, from left to right: director Yoya Tokuda, producer Ryuji Tsujimoto, and lead artist Sayaka Kenbe



THE WHYS AND HOWS OF THE CREATION OF THIS GAME ARE IMPORTANT. BUT ABOVE ALL ELSE IS HOW IT FEELS

pointed out as being the great, fresh, new stuff – the prototype was all of that rolled into one, a proof of concept. We have the knowhow for the action component; we don't need to prove that to ourselves in a prototype, we can trust ourselves to add it later. After that, we weren't always working to our schedule, but it was a good starting point for us, letting us take a fresh look at how to make a *Monster Hunter* game."

Tsujimoto admits, too, that level design was a headache early on. The Ancient Forest was the first map the team designed for the game, and they sailed past their initial deadline. He describes a long, drawn-out process of trial and error – but once they'd cracked it, the remainder of the level-design process went comparatively smoothly, as lessons learned in the long-winded creation of the Ancient Forest informed a pacier development period for those that came after it.

The link is obvious: that Capcom's experience of making the slow, grindy kind of *Monster Hunter* has made it easier this time to make a snappy, immediate one instead. And as four of us go to town on the mud-slinging, slug-like Jyuratodos, it feels well worth all that endeavour. The whys and the hows of the creation of this game are important, of course. But above all else is how it feels in the hands. It's terrific.

Combat is slow, weighty and tremendously impactful; you can feel strong blows connect even without the newly added damage numbers popping off your foe during battle. They're another concession to modern expectations, but are scarcely needed given the remarkable standard of animation on show in *Monster Hunter: World*'s bestiary. Barroth, for all its heft, limps desperately, urgently away from us as it nears death. Its health pool has been scaled upwards to account for our party's size, but it doesn't stand a chance. Serves it right for battering us into a cliffside earlier on, really.

Using bait and traps, you'll be able to engineer a meeting between two beasts in the same region, but the game is at its best when it does so spontaneously. The highlight of our two-day session comes when we're fighting Jyuratudos and Barroth ambles over to give us an assist. The mud serpent coils its body around the bony colossus, trying to throttle it, and a damage number we could only dream of pops out of the fray. Barroth responds, charging its foe, winging it badly. It's a tense back and forth and one hell of a sight, so we head for higher ground so we can take in the view. Seconds later we're scurrying desperately for cover: Rathalos, a terrifying Wyvern which, we found out earlier in the worst of ways, can comfortably one-shot us, has heard the commotion, and flown over to find out what's going on, in order to spit fire at it. We hunker down. Moments later, a Capcom staffer walks by to see us crouched low behind a rock, inching the camera along to try and maintain some kind of view. Even if it gets us killed, this is simply too good to be missed.

You can't bounce off something like that. Suddenly we see, plain as fire-strewn day, what makes this game tick. Game director **Yuya Tokuda** gives us his personal view on it: "I think the real draw of *Monster Hunter*, and what drew me to working on it, is the fact that it's this magical fantasy setting, but you're not fighting demons. These are realistic creatures that could be part of a biological ecosystem. They're living things that you can imagine yourself fighting. But there's also this element of going up against huge monsters, using big weapons, that answers this primal human desire to challenge yourself against these enormous beasts."

Sounds about right, yep. But away from that unlikely three-way fray, there's more to *Monster Hunter* – and it's an element that might just make this game the global success its series has, according to fans at least, long deserved. "We're kind of answering these basic urges," Tokuda says. "You do these challenges, you succeed, you get a reward and you get stronger. Doing all that in a multiplayer framework that draws in all these social elements is essentially what defines *Monster Hunter*."

Monster Hunter has spanned three generations of console and handheld hardware, but it seems the industry has finally caught up to its ethos. A hugely challenging, theoretically endless loot grind in a vast, beautiful world that puts online co-op at its core? That's the contemporary blockbuster game's playbook, almost to the letter, and Capcom has had a 13-year head start on it. There are two types of *Monster Hunter* players: those that adore it, and those that have never really played it. It feels like the former camp is about to get an awful lot bigger. ■

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PERFECT
ベジータ
4

B A L A N C E



Arc System Works' riotous fighting game proves beauty's much more than skin deep

By Nathan Brown



Games are born in all sorts of ways and for all sorts of reasons, but it's tempting to imagine *Dragon Ball FighterZ*'s genesis in very simplistic terms. A Bandai Namco executive sees footage of Arc System Works' gorgeous *Guilty Gear Xrd: Sign*, until now the closest a game has got to the concept of a playable cartoon. He glances at the Dragon Ball artwork on the wall. A lightbulb comes on behind him, and his pupils turn into dollar signs.

Dragon Ball FighterZ may seem like something of a no-brainer, but beneath the immediate, irresistible lure of its elevator pitch is a game of many layers. It is, as you'd expect from the maker of *Guilty Gear* and *Blazblue*, an enormously deep, monstrously technical fighting game. Yet it is also pleasantly accessible and easy to understand – a necessary move given its licence, which is familiar to and beloved by countless millions around the globe. Balancing those two very different camps is no mean feat, but our lengthy hands-on session at Bandai Namco's Tokyo HQ, including a first look at the game's story mode, suggests Namco and Arc might just have cracked it. ▶



Game *Dragon Ball FighterZ*
Developer Arc System Works
Publisher Bandai Namco Entertainment
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One
Release January 26

PERFECT BALANCE

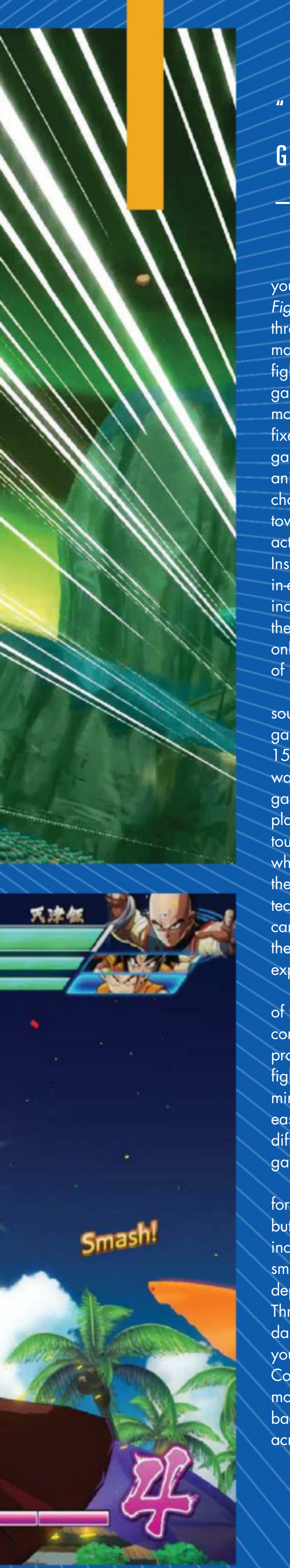
A system similar to *Marvel Vs Capcom*'s Delayed Hyper Combo – where inputting a second super-combo command while the first one plays out causes an offscreen ally to jump in with one of their own – exists, though you can also spend meter on consecutive supers from the same character

PARTY PIT

Instead of a set of boring old menu screens, mode selection in *Dragon Ball FighterZ* is done on a 3D stage, dubbed the lobby. Here, a chibi rendition of your chosen character trots about between the various activities on offer, and will see other players doing the same; you can assign a line of text to your avatar, which will also be accompanied by a stamp depicting a famous scene from the anime. A similar feature is available in the replay channel, as well as Party mode, which will be our first port of call when the story's done. It splits the three-on-three action across six players, with each taking control of a single character, filling the screen with pre-canned text chatter as the chaos unfolds. With *Destiny 2* on the wane, how nice of Arc to give our raid group something new to do.



The throw, or Dragon Rush, covers a third of the screen and is a fine deterrent to turtling opponents. This is not a game that rewards you for sitting still



"WE BELIEVE THE FUN OF FIGHTING GAMES ISN'T JUST ABOUT CONTROLS – IT'S ABOUT THE MIND GAMES"

And if you're in neither of those two camps, perhaps you'll be hooked in by the simple fact that *Dragon Ball FighterZ* is one of the best-looking games ever made. It's a three-on-three, note-perfect replication of the source material which borrows the *Xrd* games' stunning hybrid fighting engine to remarkable effect. To recap: this is a 2D game in name and appearance only. Both character models and stages are created in 3D, the camera sat in a fixed side-on perspective. At points where most fighting games load in cinematics – for super-move and KO animations, for instance, or, in this case, when a new character joins the fray and the two opponents surge towards each other for a mid-screen clash before the action resumes – the camera unhooks from its mountings. Instead of a canned animation, you see a realtime, in-engine effect – during which, Arc confirms to us, every individual frame is hand-lit by the developers. And while the game runs and reads inputs at 60 frames per second, only hand-posed keyframes are shown, a high-fidelity way of mimicking the lo-fi look of the original anime.

The effect is astonishing whether you're a fan of the source material or not, and this hybrid approach – of a 2D game that's really 3D, of one that looks to be running at 15fps when it's really being rendered at 60 – is a useful way to think about the game as a whole. This is a fighting game of deep complexity, that is also easy to get into and play. It's all but guaranteed to become a fixture on the tournament circuit, but will also be bought by anime fans, who may have never thrown a fireball in their lives, in their droves. Just as Arc has used industry-leading techniques to make a game that looks like a 28-year-old cartoon, so it has made a game that satisfies both ends of the skill spectrum, without making either one feel like their experience has been compromised.

Take, for instance, the control system. "There are a lot of fighting games out there that have super-difficult commands and combos, but we didn't want that," producer **Tomoko Hiroki** tells us. "We believe the fun of fighting games isn't just about controls – it's about the mind games. So in terms of controls, we've made it rather easy. We're trying to create depth, but not just through the difficulty of the commands. We're trying to create a gateway [to fighting games] for casual players."

To that end, *FighterZ* follows the current genre vogue for a one-button auto-combo; mash the medium-attack button and your character will perform a basic string including an aerial component which ends either with you smashing your foe to the ground, or a super combo, depending on whether you have any spare super meter. Throws have great range, and take the form of a forward dash and flurry of punches ending in a launcher, carrying you upwards with your opponent to begin an air combo. Commands have been simplified, with special and super moves activated using only quarter-circles forward and back, while the combo building blocks are universal across the cast. This is made clear during the combo trials, which rather than ask you to perform complex, maddeningly impractical and resolutely character-specific strings that you'll likely never use in a match, instead teach transferable skills that work with any character, encouraging you to move around the cast instead of sticking to the handful you've put time into figuring out. Instead, the complexity comes from learning how to use those shared foundational elements with your chosen team. One fighter's super might hit from an angle that's inappropriate for an air combo, for example, so the string may require some tweaking to fit – or maybe, with the right assist move from an offscreen ally, you'll be able to get your opponent into the position you need.

Perhaps the purest expression of *Dragon Ball FighterZ*'s dual focus on accessibility and depth, however, is its treatment of the projectile, arguably the most vital move in any character's arsenal. Here, a simple tap of X is all that's required for your character to fling some plasma across the screen; mash the button, and you'll unleash a volley of the stuff. If you're a hardened fighting-game player reading this, you might be worried by the Ki Blast. But it can be countered in style by another simple attack, a move available to the whole cast which grants full invincibility to projectiles and homes in on your target (another gives you a teleport that moves you behind your foe). Projectiles may be essential in this genre, but while mindlessly spamming them has never been easier, neither has punishing those who do so.

And while the shared combo inputs may make it easy to experiment with new characters, this is a roster of tremendous range and intricacy. Two newly announced fighters make that abundantly clear. First is Nappa, an old, burly ally of *DBZ* stalwart Vegeta. "When you look at a character like Nappa, normally you'd imagine him being a grappler that fights up close," Hiroki says. "But we've tried to make him a little bit trickier, a bit different to what you'd expect." One of Nappa's moves sees him briefly stoop to the ground, planting a seed. A second or so later, a small sprite, familiar to fans of the anime as a Saibaman, appears; it walks up to the opponent, jumps towards them and, if it lands, explodes. Any grappler player, in any fighting game, would kill for such a powerful ranged ability. Once again, this is Arc walking the tightrope of this game's different audiences, using something faithful to the anime to add a twist to fighting-game conventions to delight the genre faithful.

Captain Ginyu, meanwhile, is something else entirely. Hiroki asks the demonstrator to call up the command list; apparently, Ginyu has only four moves. Yet as in the anime, Ginyu fights with an army – in this case, a set of four allies, summoned using the Ki Blast button, coming out one at a time in a set rotation and each performing a different move. The command list may imply simplicity, and indeed, fans of the source material can just mash a single button and watch the sparks fly. Yet the veteran will need to remember which minion was called out last, and which ▶

"WE WANTED TO ADD IN DIFFERENT THINGS SO PLAYERS CAN EXPERIENCE SOMETHING NEW EACH TIME"

will come next, in order to optimise their combos. As for his Ultimate Attack, his most powerful super move, well. It's a body swap, borrowed from the anime, not only exchanging characters with your opponent, but life bars as well. "We're hoping that the core fighting-game audience will really master Ginyu – he's a very technical character to use," Hiroki says. "If someone used him in a tournament, and used the body change at the last minute when they were about to die… well, that would be huge."

Arc's efforts to satisfy all players in *Dragon Ball FighterZ*'s battle system would, however, count for nothing without the right modes. If all a beginner player can do is waltz once through arcade mode before heading online for a battering, all the developer's good work beneath the surface would likely count for nothing. Furthermore, Arc's genre peers have already shown that there's more to a fighting game's singleplayer component than simply banging a load of cutscenes together and sticking them in between fights. Given the source material, you'd almost understand if Arc went down that route. Yet, mindful of the need to accommodate the lesser skilled, it has once again put in the effort to strike a balance.

"The *Dragon Ball* games we released in the past were mostly focused on the reproduction of the original story," Hiroki says. "You would play as Goku, and play the story that he lived. But for this game, we're trying a new approach. We built a completely new, original story for this game, and you're actually going *inside* Goku. In a fighting game, since you use a specific character for a long time and devote a lot of time to each one, players see those characters as representations of themselves. That's what we want to express in the story."

It means the fourth wall is torn asunder within seconds, the anime-perfect cutscenes showing Goku assailed by some unseen force, talking directly to whatever is now controlling him. When the first opponent turns up, they acknowledge it, saying they can tell Goku's not his usual self, and that they'll refrain from using lethal force. And it's a factor elsewhere, first through a levelling system that boosts a fighter's stats the more you use them to reflect the strengthening bond between you, and then back into the story, with a character opening up to you about their feelings from time to time.

Elsewhere we see a clear effort to make a mode of variety, flexibility and replayability: a story component that is built to last. Skill pickups will allow tweaks to a warrior's core stats, boosting speed, damage and so on, or granting them unique abilities. The action is split over map screens, each containing a number of fights on multiple paths. One might lead to a fight against a powerful enemy, yielding a hefty chunk of character XP and perhaps a new skill; another will lead you to an ally in need. Save them, and they'll join your party and become controllable in battle. The mode is split into three chapters, or arcs: the first puts you on the side of Goku and the good guys, the next on the baddies, and the third on the androids, in particular Android 18, the all-new character created for the game.

It's a generous thing, all told, and while Hiroki estimates that a skilled player, taking the straightest path through the narrative, could see the credits in around ten hours, most will take a lot longer than that. And the hope is that most will stick around for longer still. "There are a number of routes, a lot of options, a lot of choices you can make. You can focus on recruiting new characters, or gaining specific items or skills. Since each story may not be super long, we wanted to add in different things so players can experience something new each time. We have a bit more to say, but I can't get into it right now."

Fighting games are, like *Dragon Ball FighterZ*'s story mode, split into three arcs. There's the bit for beginners, which does the job of easing a novice audience into the basics of the game, and the genre. At the other end of the scale is a requirement for dizzying complexity, a ▶



Despite the madness on screen, the action is oddly readable though as in other three-on-three fighting games, you have to teach yourself to tune out some of the noise. Many Story mode fights will be one-on-one battles, though

PERFECT BALANCE

3 X 3 EYES

The three-on-three set-up, with characters able to pop onscreen to perform assist moves, may suggest a carbon copy of Capcom's old *Marvel Vs Capcom* template, but there are a few vital tweaks to the formula. Most revolve around that huge, seven-stock super meter: here there are EX moves, more powerful versions of regular specials, that cost a chunk of your gauge. The teleport and homing dash also use a stock apiece. If you're worried about not having meter when you need it, relax: simply hold down two buttons and your character will power themselves up, building up the gauge at speed. In another departure from the formula, here the action resets when you lose a character and a new one joins the fray. Doubtless designed to avoid the devious set-ups many *Marvel* players use on incoming characters, it's also another opportunity for Arc to unmount the camera from its moorings and give you some more spectacle, the two warriors surging towards each other before they reset to neutral and the action begins.

seemingly infinite skill ceiling and enough high-octane thrills to ensure a game is loved by the hardcore and thrives on the tournament circuit. Yet perhaps the most vital element sits in between the two, the bridge between the on-ramp and the endgame, the path from fighting-game newbie to fighting-game god. And it is here that most games in this genre fail. The experts dive into training mode and try things out, leaning on their genre experience to learn the game. The beginners happily mash their way through the content that's been tailor-made for them, hit a wall, and cast the game aside. From what we've seen, *Dragon Ball FighterZ* does a better job than most of catering for the two very different ends of the spectrum. Whether it can fix the genre's long-standing problem with the middle ground remains to be seen, but given the work it's done elsewhere, we're cautiously optimistic.

Our image of the Bandai Namco exec and their lightbulb moment is, as Hiroki tells it at least, a little wide of the mark. To understand *FighterZ*'s genesis, you have to go back 25 years, to the run of three 2D fighting games, subtitled *Super Butoden*, that Bandai made for the SNES. "We started receiving a lot of feedback from fans that they wanted another 2D fighting game [like those]," Hiroki says. "Recently we've released a lot of 3D *Dragon Ball* fighting games. Because we'd focused a lot on 2D in the past, we'd done everything we could and 2D fighting was getting a bit old, so we shifted to 3D. We worked with Arc System Works on *Dragon Ball Z: Extreme Butoden* [a 2D fighter for 3DS], and we thought they'd be able to deliver to players a new type of 2D. That's what I always say: the evolution of 2D isn't 3D. It's a new type of 2D. That's what we're trying to reproduce in this game."

As we watch Goku deploy his most powerful attack, a series of supers strung into each other which costs six entire gauges, the screen exploding with spectacle as Arc's remarkable engine surges into top gear, we're inclined to say it's job done. It's been easy to dismiss *Dragon Ball* games in the past; they've been made at speed, within a limited budget, and aimed at an audience we've never really been part of. It's been an effective strategy for Bandai Namco – at the last public count, licensed *Dragon Ball* titles had sold over 40 million copies worldwide – but *FighterZ* has the chance to be so much more. With Capcom's recent efforts disappointing and Netherrealm long since settling into a solid, but never genre-beating groove, there is a gap in the market for a fighting game of truly mainstream appeal. This has the looks, the style, the familiarity and something of an obsession with easing novice players in; if there's any justice, we may be soon to crown a new genre king.

And if not, then Hiroki at least hopes *FighterZ* will change people's perception of big-brand games. "When you look at a licensed game, a lot of people think that the quality is not that high – that it's made just to satisfy the fans. With *FighterZ* we want to convince players that even though Dragon Ball is a worldwide brand, we can create a game on its own terms. We want to create a fanbase for Dragon Ball *games*, and be able to say that the people playing these games are people who know quality." Well, we know it when we see it. And it's here, on full display, the camera twirling and cavorting through the air in one of the best-looking games we've ever seen. ■







Story-mode maps (above) will grow more complex as you progress. The turn counter in the top left shows the maximum number of attempts you're allowed to clear every battle on screen; fail, and the map resets. It's a new idea for the fighting-game story, giving focus and purpose to chapters, rather than single fights

COLLECTED WORKS

JULIAN GOLLOP

REBELSTAR RAIDERS

Developer Julian Gollop **Publisher** Red Shift **Format** ZX Spectrum **Release** 1984

CHAOS: THE BATTLE OF WIZARDS

Developer Julian Gollop **Publisher** Games Workshop **Format** ZX Spectrum **Release** 1985

LASER SQUAD

Developer/Publisher Target Games **Format** Amstrad CPC, C64, ZX Spectrum **Release** 1988

X-COM: ENEMY UNKNOWN

Developer Mythos Games **Publisher** MicroProse **Format** Amiga, PC **Release** 1994

MAGIC & MAYHEM

Developer Mythos Games **Publisher** Virgin Interactive **Format** PC **Release** 1998

GHOST RECON: SHADOW WARS

Developer Ubisoft Sofia **Publisher** Ubisoft **Format** 3DS **Release** 2011

CHAOS REBORN

Developer/Publisher Snapshot Games **Format** PC **Release** 2015

X-COM's maker remembers over 30 years of perfecting the turn-based tactics genre

BY ALEX WILTSHIRE

Photography **James Sheppard**



Of a generation of early British game creators, only a handful are still making games today. Still fewer have threaded their careers through so many of the tectonic shifts and revolutions in business and technology that have driven the game industry since. And even fewer also have so much still to look forward to. But Julian Gollop, designer of strategy classics *Rebelstar*, *Laser Squad*, and his most celebrated game, *X-COM: Enemy Unknown*, can claim a career that has lived all of it.

Gollop started out coding games in BASIC while at school, translating his passion for strategy board games to computers. He's self-published games and founded several studios. He's watched publishers rise and fall, and worked within one of its largest. He was a pioneer of DLC, has worked with launch hardware, jumped into crowdfunding, and has explored the frontiers of developing for Early Access.

And through it all, as trends have waxed and waned, he has refined and polished to a sheen a personal fascination for a particular kind of game: turn-based squad tactics. As he continues that grand project with the forthcoming *Phoenix Point*, he looks back on the games that have brought him to today.



"REBELSTAR RAIDERS WAS THE BEGINNING OF A LONG LINE OF GAMES THAT RESULTED IN X-COM"

REBELSTAR RAIDERS

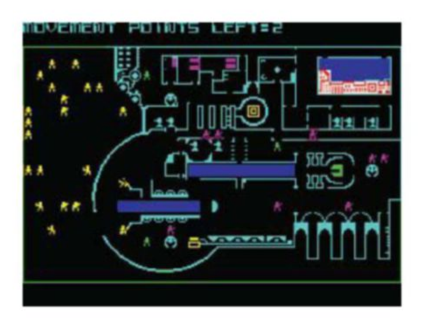
Developer Julian Gollop **Publisher** Red Shift **Format** ZX Spectrum **Release** 1984

Rebelstar Raiders came about because I wanted to implement some of the board games that I played years earlier, like *Sniper* and *Squad Leader*, which were all about squad-based tactics and true line-of-sight shooting. I thought it'd be great for a computer to do this instead of having to calculate it by hand, but I was not the best programmer in the world. *Rebelstar Raiders* had a one-screen map and each soldier was a single little character that moved in 8x8-pixel character jumps. The thing I needed was a shooting algorithm. I wanted a line of pixels to extend and shoot the enemy with a bit of randomness. A friend who was an expert in machine code wrote a little bit of code for me called Zap, and with it I could draw a line between two pixel positions and define what it hit at the end.

I was working with a group of friends who had a company called Red Shift. They were producing adaptations of board games, like Apocalypse for Games Workshop, and *Rebelstar Raiders* sold very well for them, compared with their other games. There was clearly an audience for that style of game, even though it was two-player only and included only three maps.

As I made *Rebelstar Raiders* I thought of a number of things I wanted to add to my tactical combat system. I wanted opportunity fire, or overwatch as it's commonly called now. It was a core mechanic in the board game Sniper, and made it really interesting because it adds an element of anticipation. The player had to plot exactly where they were going to wait, predicting what their opponent was doing rather than just reacting to them. I introduced that in *Rebelstar*. I also wanted inventory management, so your soldiers could use different types of equipment, especially grenades. I wanted more sophisticated rules relating to wounding and morale and stamina and stuff. These things were important parts of the overall mechanics in Squad Leader, and they weren't just about physical destruction but how well your troops performed under pressure. And I wanted to refine the explosions and destructibility of terrain, because modifying the game's environment through the effects of battle was, I felt, very important.

It's true to say that *Rebelstar Raiders* was the beginning of a long line of games that resulted in *X-COM* and now ultimately *Phoenix Point*. It's a tactical combat system that I continued to refine over time as my skills improved.



Rebelstar Raiders' three scenarios have players destroying defences on a moon, then defending their ship as it's being repaired, before assaulting the enemy's base

CHAOS: THE BATTLE OF WIZARDS

Developer Julian Gollop **Publisher** Games Workshop **Format** ZX Spectrum **Release** 1985

I originally designed *Chaos* as a board game after seeing some of my friends at school playing a Games Workshop game called Warlock. It was basically a card game with static wizards, so I thought, 'Well, I'm going to make a better game than this.' The real innovation that I was so pleased I came up with was that when you summoned creatures from your hand of cards, you actually placed the card on the board and then moved it around like a playing piece.

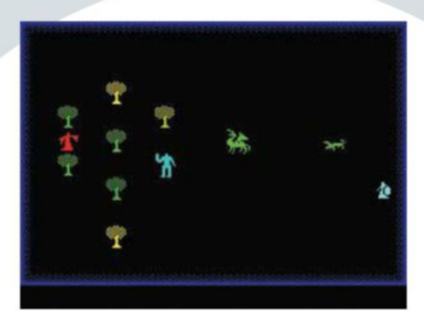
That was before home computers existed, so when I got my ZX Spectrum one of the games I really wanted to implement was *Chaos*. It was the third game I programmed entirely by myself, but the first I coded purely in assembly language, and the first with artificial intelligence, so it was a big step up for me. You could have up to eight wizards in the game; I primarily saw it as a multiplayer game in which all of them could be AI-controlled. The really nice thing was that this allowed players to play semi-cooperatively versus the AI before they fought each other to be the final victor.

I was pretty faithful to the original board game, but one thing I added, which could only have been done on a computer, was the idea that creatures could be summoned as illusions or real. If you summoned as an illusion it was guaranteed to succeed, otherwise it was a percentage chance, but the other wizards could 'disbelieve' it. It introduced an interesting game of bluff and counter-bluff with other human players and was still playable around one computer with one keyboard. To cast your spells you had to cover your hand to secretly press the keys to maintain the element of bluff.

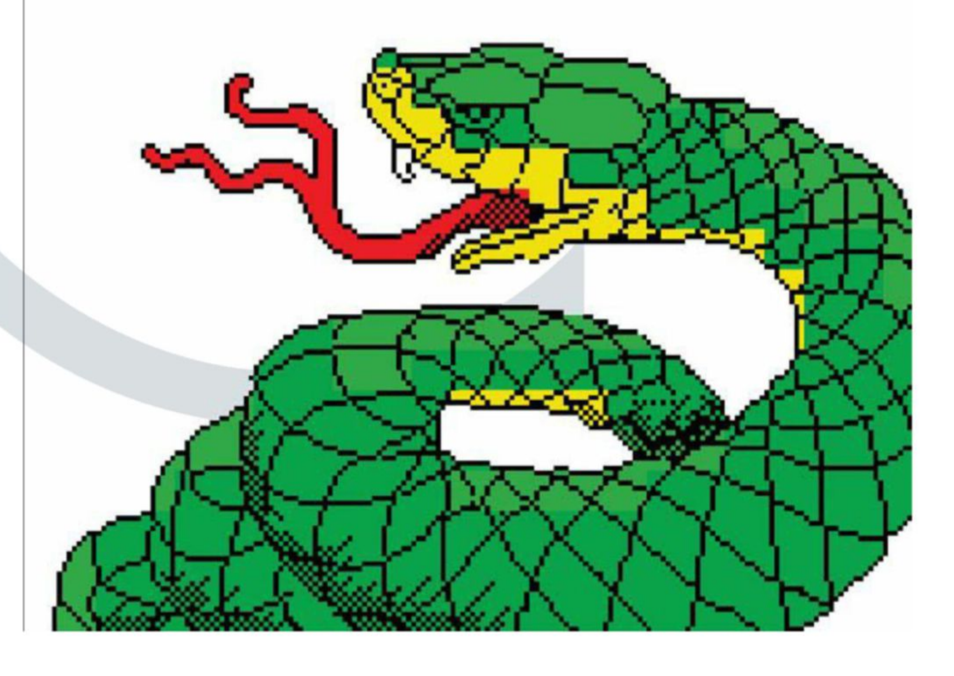
Unfortunately, it had a number of bugs, and some were slightly weird. The notorious one is the Turmoil spell. It randomly repositioned everything on the entire map, but I thought it wasn't very useful or good, so I left it out of the initial spell allocation system. But there was another spell called Magic Wood, which a wizard could use to randomly be given a spell, and there was a chance that'd get Turmoil. When they cast it, players reported the game crashed after trying to move everything around the map for five minutes solid. I don't know why; I never tested it thoroughly because it wasn't supposed to be there. The spell became a rare and legendary thing you'd be lucky to see. 'Have you seen the Turmoil spell in *Chaos*?'

Chaos was one of Games Workshop's first original computer games. I was desperately trying to finish it because I'd started my university degree at London School Of Economics and I needed to get on with studying, and I have absolutely no idea how well it sold. I was paid some money for it, but I don't remember seeing any royalty statements, and I resolved from that point on that I was going to do my own deals. The next game I did, which ▶





Players start *Chaos* with a selection of spells, each with a particular chance of success. An important strategy involves their alignment: the more lawful or chaotic spells you cast, the more chance they'll be successful



was *Rebelstar*, I took directly to Telecomsoft and it was put on their Firebird label. It still wasn't the best business negotiation because I got 10p a copy and the game retailed at £1.99, but *Rebelstar* did well and my first royalty cheque was £6,000 or something. I bought a nice electric guitar, the first thing I could think of, and I left university.

LASER SQUAD

Developer/Publisher Target Games
Format Amstrad CPC, C64, ZX Spectrum **Release** 1988

When I left university I set up a company with a friend called Target Games. The idea was to make a new squad-based tactical game. It was an evolution of *Rebelstar* with the difference that it was going to include hidden enemies which were only revealed by line of sight. Battle is about evasion and detection, about this tension of trying to find the enemy while at the same time avoiding detection yourself. For me it's a fundamental part of how squad-level tactics should really work in a game.

Each soldier had a facing, so if you came across an enemy looking away from you, you could see them and they couldn't see you. This gave the opportunity to dive back into cover to avoid detection or to take a shot. That idea was married with opportunity fire so you had to decide which way you wanted your soldier to face to anticipate where an enemy might come. It was an evolution of every game I'd made previously, but really, for the first time it was no longer a game of chess. It was about anticipation and prediction and bluff. Really, *Laser Squad* is the foundation of the tactical system in *X-COM*.

My friend left, so my brother Nick joined. I'd nearly finished working on the Spectrum version, he started working on the C64 version, and then we did a Amstrad CPC version of the game. We did all the 8bit formats at the time, and we were self-publishing so we got the boxes made, printed, we had them sent off to the distributors, we paid for a bit of advertising. We were in business.











Laser Squad's missions are strongly objective-based, with the need to rescue soldiers and assassinate enemies. Gollop returned to the game in 2002 with the multiplayer-focused *Laser Squad Nemesis*

The other innovation we put in *Laser Squad* was a business one. In the back of the rulebook there was a coupon you could send off with a postal order or cheque to buy an expansion kit on tape, which came with two extra missions that you'd load after you loaded the main game. The idea was that we'd produce a series; it sounds very basic, but we thought it was an amazing innovation! It was a good business model for us because all we had to do was to manufacture them very cheaply and do a bit of postage; me and Nick would come into our little Harlow office in the morning, get all the orders in the post, take the tapes out of the boxes, put them in bags and address them and we had a franking machine and took them to the post office. Then we'd start coding for the rest of the day.

X-COM: ENEMY UNKNOWN

Developer Mythos Games **Publisher** MicroProse **Format** Amiga, PC
Release 1994

We realised we needed to step up our game. From our point of view, the future of strategy games was going to be on PC, primarily because of the stuff coming out of the US, especially by MicroProse, like *Railway Tycoon*. We'd made a demo for *Laser Squad 2* on the Atari ST, but we really wanted to make it for PC and we took it to a list of three publishers. At the top was MicroProse. The reason was obvious: they did *Railway Tycoon*, and *Civilization* had just come out. It was 1991, and they were simply the best computer game developer and publisher in the entire world, and Sid Meier was the best game designer.

We thought it was a long shot. Why would they be interested in what we had to offer? And we were also a bit worried because we'd never actually made anything on PC before. Atari ST was as close as we'd got. So we took the demo to MicroProse UK and one guy there, Steve Hand, was a big fan of *Laser Squad* and he really wanted MicroProse to do the game. But he was struggling to get them to accept it, so they came back to us with a proposal for



X-COM's isometrically presented 'Battlescape' levels were not only stunning to look at in 1994 but also procedurally generated, built by patching together pre-designed blocks of desert, city, farm and jungle to make surprisingly varied environments

something much bigger as a game concept. In particular, they wanted something that could match *Civilization* in scope and complexity, because MicroProse US rather disparagingly regarded MicroProse UK as the toy division.

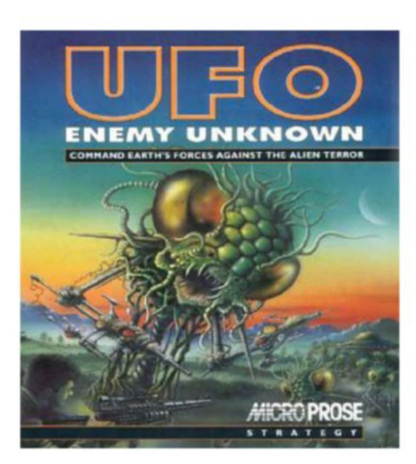
The primary requirements were a Civilopedia and a *Civ*-like tech tree. Which was fine. They were very keen for the setting to be based on Gerry Anderson's UFO TV series, because they were big fans of it, and from that we took the concept of *X-COM* itself, because in the TV show there's something called SHADO, which is this worldwide organisation trying to prevent infiltration of UFOs on Earth. They had Moon-based interceptors and aircraft interceptors, and if the UFO got through they had a ground-based interceptor, a ridiculous-looking vehicle. We didn't have the Moon-based interceptors, but the concept went straight into *X-COM*: we had aircraft, and you could send your ground squad to tackle UFO landings.

What we didn't take were the aliens themselves. They were, disappointingly, exactly like human beings. So I looked at some UFO folklore, in particular a book called Alien Liaison by Timothy Good, which contained all this juicy stuff about abductions by greys and cattle mutilations, reverse-engineering captured UFOs, shady deals between governments and hybrid aliens. It was really good. I just took it all and put it in the game as well, but the graphics came from the imagination of John Reitze, who was the main artist. Steve Hand and I looked at a screenful of sprites and we decided which were the most interesting-looking ones and they went in the game. I had to retro-fit what they actually did; it was quite an eclectic mix which didn't really seem to fit together!

From our initial meetings at MicroProse I quickly wrote the original design document. Although it was a bit sketchy, only about 12 pages long, the final game is very close to it. I came up with the idea of the Geoscape, a globe that is your main strategic planning device, and that you have things flying around and cities and countries. I hadn't really fleshed out how interceptions would work but everything was there in terms of funding from countries, and UFO activity in different regions; you had to deal with it or it'd affect your funding. Aliens could take over countries. There were terror missions. There was the idea of looting stuff and reverse-engineering it. That was all there in the document. But MicroProse initially struggled to understand the game. I had to go to a very large meeting with 12 people there from marketing, game designers, senior producers, and I had to explain it to them. It must have worked, because we got the contract signed very shortly after that. We were away.

The original game was made by me and Nick, and a couple of artists, and that was it. A sound designer and musician came in at the end of the project. The Geoscape and the Battlescape didn't come together very well until very, very late in the project, partly due to problems with our scheduling. We had monthly milestones planned and we were going to spend several months on the tactical side and then 11 months on other side. We started working purely on the tactical game but we didn't finish it before we started to work on the Geoscape, and we didn't get them working together at all until about four or five months before the game was finished, and then it really was a bit of a mess. ▶

"THEY WERE VERY KEEN FOR THE SETTING TO BE BASED ON GERRY ANDERSON'S UFO TV SERIES"



Unfortunately, *Enemy Unknown* shipped with a bug that set the difficulty level to Beginner after the first mission



Magic & Mayhem features claymation cutscenes, which offer some continuity with the way its sprites were developed. Both the cutscenes and the models in the game were created by stop-motion animator and model-maker Alan Friswell

Still, testament to the original vision being quite good, it did end up pretty much what I wanted it to be. Really, it's a question of the whole being greater than the sum of its parts, because once you started getting the interaction between the strategic and tactical it really felt like you were in command of an organisation. Everything you did made a difference and had an impact on the future. If you lost a solider it was bad, or you might get a lot of loot from a mission that could really boost your research and manufacturing. It was cool. I mean, there were certainly problems, like the micromanagement of resources, and you had to equip your soldiers every time. But in terms of the core mechanics of the gameplay I was really happy with the way it turned out.

Sadly, it wasn't the case for MicroProse, because in 1993 they were taken over by Spectrum Holobyte. Spectrum Holobyte visited MicroProse UK and they told them to cancel a bunch of projects. They took one look at *X-COM* and said it looked real crap. 'Stop working on this rubbish right away.' But there was a lot of support for the project at MicroProse UK by this stage and they defied their new rulers in the US and kept the project going. They didn't tell us it had been cancelled. That would've worried us, for sure.

"THEY REQUIRED US TO WORK SEVEN DAYS A WEEK, 10 HOURS A DAY FOR SEVERAL MONTHS"



Then it came back on Spectrum Holobyte's radar. They'd required MicroProse UK to deliver a project for their end of quarter to meet financial projections. So MicroProse UK told them that *X-COM* was still going and it could be ready in time. They said, 'OK, fine, we need something.' But it put a lot of pressure on us, because suddenly we really had to finish it by end of March, and they required us to work in-house in Chipping Sodbury seven days a week, 10 hours a day for several months. They didn't give us any extra resources. In fact, we had to beg them to give us a more powerful computer to use, because my brother's computer couldn't handle it! My computer was having serious overheating problems. I had to remove the case and it crashed occasionally. They begrudged us one new computer for Nick and they stuck us in this tiny little room. We just had to crunch.

X-COM: Enemy Unknown was a really big success for them. So of course they wanted a sequel and said they needed it in six months. We said, look, we can't do anything meaningful in six months. The best we can do is a minor update to the game. We wanted to do something much more ambitious. And they said, 'Right, fine. Why don't you license the code to us to do the sequel and you can work on the third one in the series.' So that's how *Terror From The Deep* became the sequel, and it was done entirely in-house at MicroProse, using all our code, which they didn't change very much, and we worked on *X-COM Apocalypse*, which was released in 1997.

It took them longer than six months to do it. I think it was about a year. That told them. And they had a large team on it! I remember visiting them when they'd just finished the gold master and they had a bit of a celebration meeting, and there were 15 people there. I was like, blimey, this is a big team! Wow, if we had that

amount of resources for a year we could've done something amazing! And all they'd done is a reskin of the original game? Good grief.

MAGIC & MAYHEM

Developer Mythos Games **Publisher** Virgin Interactive
Format PC **Release** 1998

We switched publisher to Virgin Interactive and we had a four-game deal with them. The first project was going to be *Magic & Mayhem*, and the idea was to create a wizard casting game, loosely inspired by the original *Chaos* but this time with a realtime game system and a campaign structure where you'd go from one region to another fulfilling various mission objectives.

We put a lot of effort into the core mechanics of the spellcasting, where you combined items with Law, Chaos or Neutrality talismans to create different spells at the beginning of each level. It was a nice game system, but the singleplayer aspect of the game was a bit of a struggle. It was almost an afterthought, and we wanted to have a much more heavy RPG flavour to the game so you could customise your character, a lot more progression systems.

Virgin Interactive really pushed back against this. We started to make it before *Diablo* came out, and it was also before *Baldur's Gate*, which was the real milestone in RPGs. They said RPGs don't sell, which was, of course, complete rubbish. They wanted to make it much more RTS-focused, partly because of *Command & Conquer*, which was very popular at the time. They took us on a trip to Las Vegas to have an audience with Brett Sperry, who founded Westwood Studios, to get his input.

One of the things we struggled with was how to generate the art. It was a bit crazy but we had this idea that we'd make all the creatures out of plasticine, put an armature inside them and do stop-motion animation, putting them on a turntable and to take shots of them from eight different angles with a video camera

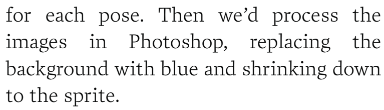








Ghost Recon: Shadow Wars was the second highest rated of 3DS' launch games, partly because it was so full-featured, with 37 campaign missions and also as many as 20 standalone skirmish missions



for each pose. Then we'd process the images in Photoshop, replacing the background with blue and shrinking down to the sprite.

It sounds a nice simple system, but we had an absolute nightmare in the cleanup of all the graphics. We had to employ people to process them and there were so many mistakes, including losing entire sequences of images. Each creature had a death sequence which usually meant the destruction of the model itself. We found there were some animation problems, some things we'd forgotten to do, and we couldn't go back and do them because the model had been destroyed! So it was just crazy.

It also had a difficult release. Virgin Interactive weren't doing too well. Westwood Studios had been sold to EA and they had to do a deal with Bethesda, who were helping fund the game, and they sold it in the US. It sold okay in Europe but not so well in the US, probably because by the time it was released the graphics were looking quite dated and the game system didn't know what it wanted to be. It had RPG and RTS elements but they weren't really there. It was a difficult project which didn't work out so well, though quite a lot of people liked it.

GHOST RECON: SHADOW WARS

Developer Ubisoft Sofia **Publisher** Ubisoft **Format** 3DS **Release** 2011

After I had finished *Rebelstar Tactical Command* on GBA I had the intention to go to Bulgaria and take it easy for a while and just explore the country and catch up on games and reading. But I got a bit bored! I had some projects I was planning to do but I realised they'd be a bit too difficult to do on my own and I missed working with a creative team. So when I heard Ubisoft were setting up a studio in Sofia, I applied and I was hired as a game designer in November 2006.

The first project I worked on was *Chess Master*, which was a bit strange because I thought chess had already been designed, but we produced some ▶

interesting minigames. Very quickly I became a producer because the studio was so inexperienced. I worked on various projects, many of which never saw the light of day, all for Nintendo DS, but we also made several pitches to Ubisoft's editorial office. One of them was *Ghost Recon* meets *X-COM* for Nintendo DS.

Luckily there was a fan of *X-COM* on the editorial board and he really liked the idea. At the time they were working on a new *Ghost Recon* game and Ubisoft had this cross-platform simultaneous launch strategy. It didn't matter if the games were different but one requirement was that the stories had to be related. Our game would be a 'sidequel' to the main console game, *Future Soldier*, and a turn-based strategy while theirs was an action game.

But then Ubisoft started to insist that we did certain things that didn't make much sense. The console version had this weird concept, 'united we are stronger', so as a squad of four you could go around together shooting things and one player would control the movements of all four and the others would do the shooting; the idea was they had combined special powers in this formation. It was a weird idea; I didn't really understand it, and from *Shadow Wars*' point of view it didn't make sense because one thing you really shouldn't do as a squad is move around together because you're vulnerable to explosives, and it's also a bit boring. We tried to push back, and then I got a call saying that we didn't have to worry any more and that we could make it the way we wanted. I later found out that they cancelled *Future Soldier* to completely reboot it. But they couldn't reboot our game because by this stage we'd transitioned from DS into a 3DS launch title.

That was really tough, because when we finally got Nintendo's 3DS SDK it was like a circuit board in a cardboard box. It was very unfinished. Fortunately, we'd made a very good decision early on in the project to build everything on PC using XNA and C#. Our idea was then to translate it to DS. So suddenly switching to 3DS didn't have a big impact on us, though it was a struggle to make the engine work on the SDK hardware.



"MY BOSS WAS COMPLETELY WRONG, AS HE WAS ABOUT MANY, MANY OTHER THINGS"



Then, very late in development, Nintendo dropped the bombshell that the 3DS' upper screen was stereoscopic 3D. They kept it secret from all the development teams because they didn't want it to leak! Beforehand, we couldn't figure out why the upper screen was larger than the lower screen, which for us was the primary screen because of its stylus input, and the upper screen was for information. Oh crap, we thought, we had to swap our screens around and forego stylus input. It wasn't such a big transition but it was a shock because it was so close to launch.

Something I've never talked about is that the first prototype we produced was much more *X-COM*-like than the final game. It had a strategy element and the tactical game was more like *X-COM*. It had overwatch and more sophisticated systems, and it also had a two-action point system, almost exactly the same as the one in Firaxis' *XCOM*! We thought it was an interesting concession to making it more playable. But when we presented it to the editorial board, they had a really negative reaction. They said it looked far too much like a PC game. I said, 'Well, we did pitch it as *X-COM* meets *Ghost Recon*! We can really make this work.' But they said, 'No, there's only one kind of strategy game on Nintendo handhelds and that's *Advance Wars*. If it isn't like that, it isn't a proper handheld game.' So we had to go back and make it like *Advance Wars*. I made the interface very similar, while retaining the squad-based mechanics that we wanted. I think we did quite a good job and maybe the editorial board were right to make it more familiar to *Advance Wars* players.

We were worried it was a bit too basic, but it seemed to go down quite well with many players. Unfortunately, the launch of the 3DS itself wasn't a success, partly because its price was out of whack with what the market expected and the launch lineup was really lacklustre. Nintendo fixed these problems but my boss was opposed to doing a sequel. He said the 3DS was dead and that we had to go with the PS Vita so we worked on *Assassin's Creed*

Liberation. I love Nintendo handhelds and I've made two games for Nintendo. It's a shame I wasn't able to make a follow-up to *Shadow Wars*. And then the 3DS ended up a success and the Vita wasn't, so my boss was completely wrong about that, as he was about many, many other things.

CHAOS REBORN

Developer/Publisher Snapshot Games **Format** PC **Release** 2015

In 2010, 2K announced the game that was eventually called *The Bureau: XCOM Declassified*. There was a big backlash against it by fans, saying it wasn't the game they wanted. I was also infuriated and I thought, 'Right, that's it, I'm going to do my own version of *X-COM*'. I wanted to do my own thing again and was going to crowdfund it. In 2011 I started to put a team together for it and planned to leave Ubisoft.

But then Firaxis announced their *XCOM*. I was utterly, utterly dismayed. I thought my plans were basically torpedoed. I believed that if anyone could do a good job with the franchise it surely had to be Firaxis, they'd do it properly. And they did. So I thought, 'OK, let's not do that, let's do a reboot of an earlier game', because it'd be a smaller project and easier to do. I picked *Chaos* because it was a favourite of mine.

We established a new studio, Snapshot Games, and did a Kickstarter campaign. A lot of the supporters were fans of the original, and it was a really nice project to work on. We encountered a dilemma, though, because the game is multiplayer-focused. I think it worked well as that, but the singleplayer game not so much. It's just not so interesting fighting against an AI: the bluff mechanic doesn't work so well, you don't get this emotional rollercoaster of the strange behaviour of other players. So a group of fans were really keen on the game but it didn't reach much of a wider audience.

One of the other problems was that the random-number stuff was really too brutal for a lot of players to handle. It was really extreme, especially in the combat.



Chaos Reborn raised $211,000 during its 2014 Kickstarter campaign, only reaching its goal in its final 34 hours. Backers had access to early versions and it was released on Steam Early Access in December that year. It wasn't great timing, but with funds running low it was necessary. "Ideally we'd have released it much later when it was closer to the finish," Gollop says



Based on a single percentage, you either killed the enemy or you didn't. Of course, for experienced players it's all about managing your risk and assessing that on percentages, and one of the obvious ways to mitigate your risk is not to get your wizard in range of being attacked, because anything can kill you in one hit. We found a lot of players simply couldn't get this at all. They assumed their wizards can soak up damage. It makes the game really dynamic and exciting for people who get it, but we were getting these negative reviews about RNG and so we spent two or three weeks on a reduced RNG version. It worked quite well but of course it split our playerbase.

Obviously *X-COM* also faced this problem. One of the biggest complaints is when an enemy is right next to a player and they've got an 85 per cent chance to hit and they miss. 'That's absolutely ridiculous!' People ragequit and never play again. It's an issue they partly solved in *XCOM 2*, and we had another mode in *Chaos Reborn*. It's a rather sobering lesson in game design and how people manage random factors. Still, it sold well enough for us to start work on the next game, *Phoenix Point*. So from that point of view it was a success, to lead to the next game. ■

THE MAKING OF...



DOWNWELL

Spelunky, Twitter and seven years of opera: the surprising story behind this exhilarating smartphone shooter

By Chris Schilling

Developer Moppin
Publisher Devolver Digital
Format Android, iOS, PC, PS4, Vita
Origin Japan
Release 2015

The influence of The Matrix on modern videogames is incalculable. Yet the Wachowskis' action classic almost meant we missed out on one of the most exciting debut games of recent years. **Ojiro Fumoto** was in his mid-teens, and deeply in love with videogames. His parents' SNES had defined his formative experiences with the medium, and informed his decision to pursue a career in game development. Then a trip to the cinema convinced him his dream job might be beyond his capabilities. "I saw those hackers doing all kinds of stuff, with all that scrolling green text that viewers couldn't make any sense out of, yet they somehow could," Fumoto remembers. "I basically thought programming was like that – that it was something only the smartest people in the world could handle. So I gave up."

Happily, Fumoto soon reversed his decision, devising a contingency plan. If he couldn't become a programmer or designer, he could perhaps sneak in through the back door by learning how to compose music for games. He was so keen on the idea, in fact, that he joined a high school that specialised in music tuition. But to get in, he had to major in an instrument, and he had no experience in that regard. "The teachers there basically suggested that I take up singing. It had nothing to do with composing, but it was just something I had to do. So I started studying opera singing."

His voice, it turned out, wasn't half bad. In fact, he eventually ended up at one of the country's most prestigious institutions, the Tokyo University Of The Arts. "As a result, I ended up practising opera singing for seven years, and by the end of university, I'd almost forgotten what I had originally wanted to do," Fumoto says. "Or rather I was so focused on singing that I hadn't really learned anything to do with composing."

As his graduation date approached, Fumoto began to seriously think about his future. Sure, he had a talent for opera, but this was not his dream. But the thriving independent development scene around Xbox Live and iOS, with several stories of tiny studios achieving great success, convinced him he could study game development in his own time. After conducting some internet research into the most accessible creative tools, he downloaded GameMaker Studio. Fumoto's dream job was suddenly back within his grasp.

Seeking ideas for inspiration, he happened across a blog post from Vlambeer's Rami Ismail.



The heart balloon is a highly useful upgrade, slowing your fall speed and exploding should an enemy come into contact with it. It renews at the start of a new stage

A fan of the studio since *Ridiculous Fishing*, Fumoto was keen on Ismail's "game a week" idea, which challenged creators to gain useful experience by making small games within seven days. Keen to work within Ismail's established constraints, he boned up on GameMaker and began to develop his first game.

"IT DIDN'T MAKE SENSE TO HAVE THE LEVELS BE LONG HORIZONTALLY, BECAUSE YOU CAN'T REALLY SEE THAT FAR"

"The first one was really shitty," he says, modestly. "So was the second, and so was the third one, and I continued making really small, really shitty games for 12 consecutive weeks." Ironically, it was the 13th with which he struck gold, as he assembled the first prototype for what would become *Downwell*. By now, he'd acclimatised to GameMaker and was feeling confident enough to relax that self-imposed seven-day rule. "I thought it would be a good exercise to maybe extend [development] two weeks or a month to make a bigger project than I had been making previously," he says. "I really didn't plan for it to become this big, it just kind of happened. I did see some more potential in the prototype than I had in my other games, but it was for multiple reasons that I decided to spend more time on it."

One of those reasons was a much more ambitious brief. "Really, it started with the idea that I wanted to make *Spelunky* for smartphones." Fumoto says. He started brainstorming how that might work, and, having decided to extend the development period, opted to enforce a different kind of restriction, limiting himself to using just three virtual buttons to control the game: move left, move right and jump. He adopted *Spelunky*'s approach to level design, too, using procedural generation both to save time, and to give his game greater replayability. While most platform games scroll horizontally, Fumoto was aware that the most natural way to hold a smartphone is in portrait mode. "It didn't make sense to have the levels be long horizontally, because you can't really see that far," he says. So from the first week of development, his 13th game had players steadily progressing down a central shaft.

It was two weeks into development that Fumoto settled on the game's hook. He equipped the player character with a pair of boots that fired downwards as they fell, and the rest began to fall into place. Still, the shooting mechanics went through multiple iterations before Fumoto settled on the current system, whereby the boots automatically reload when the player touches any surface. At first, the player had a set amount of ammunition and could shoot without reloading – but they would have to pick up ammo drops within the level if they wanted to keep using that weapon, as in most firstperson shooters. Borrowing such a commonplace idea seemed to make perfect sense, but in practice Fumoto found that it had a negative impact on his game's tempo. "Because there was a limitation on the ammo, it became harder for the player to shoot at all, because they wanted to preserve that ammo. And I didn't want them to do that, because shooting was the most fun you could have in the game," he says.

Taking further inspiration from *Spelunky*, Fumoto was keen to have shops in the game where players could buy a range of upgrades. Initially, he placed those within the well itself; indeed, in the early version of the game, there were no caves to duck into at all. But, like a pushy shop assistant hovering over your shoulder, the bats and other enemies made it impossible to browse. "So I made the shops appear in these side caves that you can go into, so you would have a safe place where the enemies don't attack you," Fumoto explains. But that created another problem. Players exiting the shop ▶

would often get immediately attacked by bats upon returning to the main well, with no way to avoid harm. Hence the pace-breaking timevoids. "I realised it was very unfair, so I thought it would make sense to have a barrier of sorts that would shield the player from taking damage," he says. And then I thought maybe if time stopped while you were in that bubble that would be even better. I implemented that, and it was indeed better, so I kept it that way."

The game's striking three-colour palette, meanwhile, was not a conscious restriction so much as Fumoto acknowledging his own limitations. "It came from the fact that I can't draw pixel art that well," he says, almost sheepishly. "I had no real sense for a good colour palette, but I knew I really couldn't go wrong with just black and white and red. It was just basically a way of me slacking. Well, not really slacking, but simplifying so that I could handle all the art by myself."

Fumoto might not be the finest pixel artist – and he'd be the first to say as much – but his designs are charming, and in combination with the palette, they gave *Downwell* a distinctive look that was warmly received even in its early stages. Suitably encouraged, he began to post screenshots of the game on social media. Among the comments he received, someone suggested it might look good with a Game Boy theme as an unlockable. "At the time, you would just play the game, you would die, and you would restart, but there was no progression, no incremental aspect to the game," he said. "So after that [suggestion] I figured maybe I could prepare a bunch of different colour palettes, and that might make for a cool unlockable. It ended up working pretty well, I think."

In the meantime, Fumoto had been emboldened by the game's first public airing in Japan. At Picotachi, a monthly show-and-tell event for designers held in a Tokyo cafe, Fumoto demonstrated *Downwell* during a short presentation. Having only previously shown his game to close friends, he was very nervous. But he needn't have worried. "After the presentation everyone came up to me and they were like, 'Wow, is this really your game? You're making this alone? This looks amazing'," he recalls. "That really helped boost my confidence about the game."

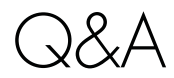
As development continued, Fumoto noticed a trend among developers of posting GIFs on Twitter rather than static screens. He began to produce some of his own for *Downwell*, a decision that would ultimately bring the game to much wider attention. One GIF in particular, showing a drone following the player's avatar, and shooting as they did, was shared by a host of indie developers, catching the eye of Devolver Digital. The publisher expressed immediate interest: 'What is this and how do we play it?' it replied. Clearly thrilled, Fumoto responded, and Devolver asked him to send over a build. "They played it and said, 'Do you want to partner up with this, maybe?' and I said, 'Hell, yeah!'" he recalls. The number 13 was proving lucky for Fumoto.

Devolver's involvement with the game's design was minimal, the publisher acting in an advisory capacity, happy to trust Fumoto to get on with making the game. "One of the guys from Devolver would play it occasionally and he would give me his personal opinions on it – like 'Maybe it's too hard', or something," he explains. "But it was never anything like 'It's not going to sell, you have to make it easier for accessibility', it was just his personal opinion." Any final decisions on the game's difficulty, and even its pricing, were left to Fumoto to decide.

As a new graduate, Fumoto was all but broke, certainly incapable of footing the costs of touring *Downwell* at events. So his publisher flew him to the likes of PAX and GDC, where the designer got to watch strangers play his game for the first time and listen to their feedback. The process was, he says, incredibly fruitful and informative: "It was a great experience to see people play the game with no bias. I mean, they're not my friends, so they're not going to just say nice things about it." Watching players alone was enough to convince Fumoto that *Downwell* was a touch too hard for most. After each new convention he attended, he would tone down the challenge slightly. Readability was another issue: if it wasn't immediately clear to a player how an upgrade would behave, he would take note and fix it after the event.

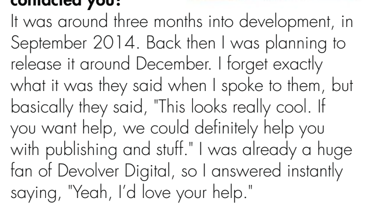
It was at GDC that Fumoto was finally able to get help making the game's music and sound effects, a job he'd been putting off for some time. By a stroke of good fortune, he was able to recruit talent from two of his favourite games. At a party organised by Devolver, he was introduced to *Spelunky* composer Eirik Suhrke, and the man responsible for *Nuclear Throne*'s wonderfully crunchy sound design, Joonas Turner. "They were basically my heroes," he says. "I couldn't have dreamed that I'd be working with them, so when they offered to become part of the project, there was no way I was going to decline."

Fumoto expresses an interest in making a sequel, though he has plenty on his plate for the foreseeable future: he's already teamed up with Suhrke, *Spelunky* creator Derek Yu and others on retro-themed compendium *UFO 50*. But can we expect him to combine his talents for opera and game design at some stage? "Probably not, no," he laughs. "I have no passion for singing at all. It was just something that I ended up doing." Still, if the whole game development thing ever falls through, Fumoto has the unlikeliest of fallbacks. On the evidence of his debut game, however, we doubt he'll ever need one. ■



Q&A

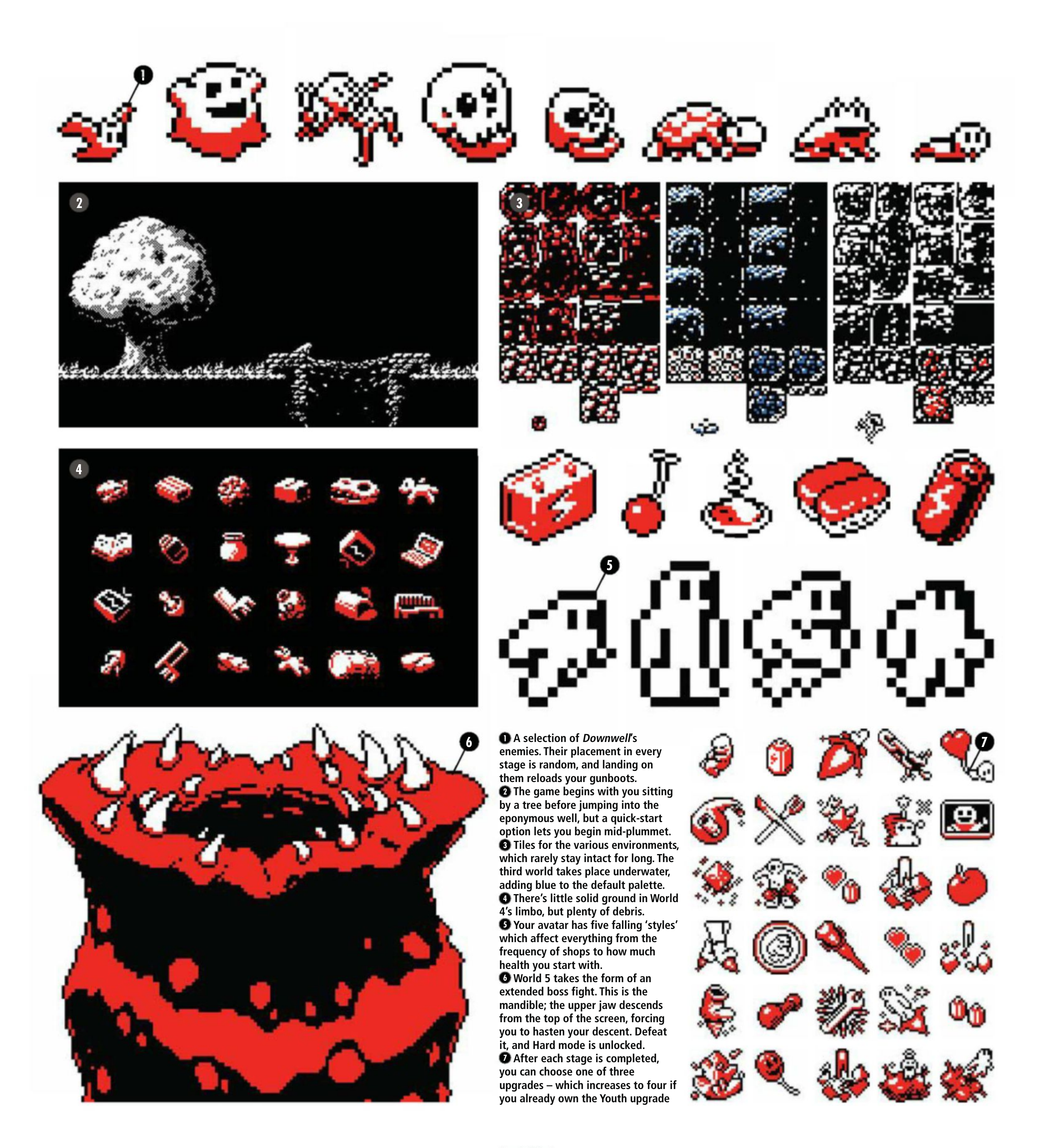
Ojiro Fumoto
Designer/programmer/artist



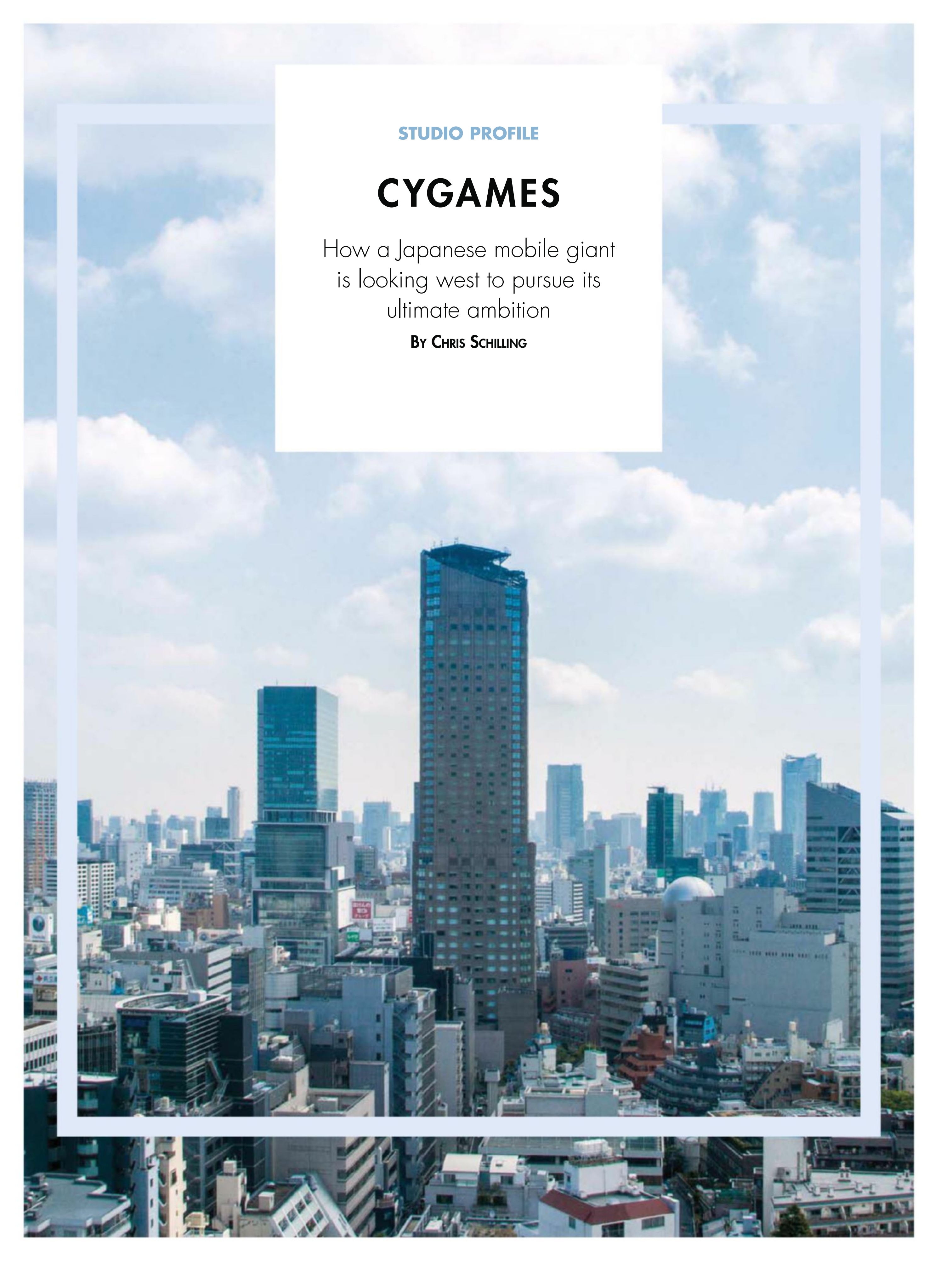
How far into development were you when Devolver contacted you?
It was around three months into development, in September 2014. Back then I was planning to release it around December. I forget exactly what it was they said when I spoke to them, but basically they said, "This looks really cool. If you want help, we could definitely help you with publishing and stuff." I was already a huge fan of Devolver Digital, so I answered instantly saying, "Yeah, I'd love your help."

When did you decide to release it on other platforms? Did Devolver suggest that?
Yeah, it was something we talked about before [launch]. Initially, I was only going to release the game on mobile, and I had told them that. I would occasionally send them a build of the game, but it's just too cumbersome to send an iOS build to play on iPhone, because Apple just doesn't let you do that. It was a lot easier for me to just send them a build that works on Windows that you can play with keyboards. One day they asked me, "Hey, the game's already playable on PC with the keyboard, why not release this on Steam?" And I was like, "Oh, that's a good idea". (laughs)

Which games first sparked that passion that led you wanting to get into development?
I've been into games all my life. My parents had a SNES, and ever since I can remember I was playing on it. One of the games that really made me who I am today was *Super Metroid*. I've been a huge fan of it ever since. I mean, I have a lot of 'Best game of my life' contenders, but *Super Metroid* is definitely one of them in that it shaped my love for platformers and its feel for jumping and shooting.



❶ A selection of *Downwell*'s enemies. Their placement in every stage is random, and landing on them reloads your gunboots.
❷ The game begins with you sitting by a tree before jumping into the eponymous well, but a quick-start option lets you begin mid-plummet.
❸ Tiles for the various environments, which rarely stay intact for long. The third world takes place underwater, adding blue to the default palette.
❹ There's little solid ground in World 4's limbo, but plenty of debris.
❺ Your avatar has five falling 'styles' which affect everything from the frequency of shops to how much health you start with.
❻ World 5 takes the form of an extended boss fight. This is the mandible; the upper jaw descends from the top of the screen, forcing you to hasten your descent. Defeat it, and Hard mode is unlocked.
❼ After each stage is completed, you can choose one of three upgrades – which increases to four if you already own the Youth upgrade



STUDIO PROFILE

CYGAMES

How a Japanese mobile giant is looking west to pursue its ultimate ambition

By Chris Schilling

There's no better example of the astonishing rise of Japan's mobile-game industry in recent years than Tokyo's Cygames. Set up in 2011 by web services company CyberAgent, the developer originally had a team of just 30 staff. Its debut release, card-battle game *Rage Of Bahamut*, was published by mobile giant DeNA (perhaps best-known in the west for its partnership with Nintendo) in early 2012. Today, a little more than five years on, Cygames boasts almost 60 times as many employees. *Rage Of Bahamut* is still popular in Japan; likewise, 2014's free-to-play RPG *Granblue Fantasy*, which has since spawned an anime series and a film, while last year's *Shadowverse* took $100m in revenue in its first six months. It now sponsors a *Street Fighter* team including the likes of Daigo Umehara and Eduardo 'PR Balrog' Perez, and is working on its first big-budget console game, codenamed *Project Awakening*. By any criteria, that's quite a start, and Cygames' ambitions are still growing.

Some shrewd opportunism played a part in the company's rapid ascent. If *Rage Of Bahamut*'s combination of immediacy and tactical nuance made it irresistible to Japanese players, its extraordinary success was aided by a boom in the free-to-play market that really began in the early 2000s. When Konami's *Dragon Collection* launched in 2010 on social networking service Gree, it was considered a fairly modest project, but it quickly began making the kind of money that encouraged the publisher to shift its focus almost exclusively toward mobile – to the chagrin of many a *Metal Gear Solid* fan. But *Dragon Collection*'s unexpected success suddenly meant every publisher wanted a slice of the same pie, while establishing a template for the card battle genre that most were keen to follow.

Rage Of Bahamut stood out from the crowd of imitators, not least since it managed to translate some of that success overseas. Indeed, it enjoyed a Bryan Adams-like stay at number one in the Top Grossing charts on both Android and iOS, eventually attracting a player base around three million strong. Though the genre was hardly established in the west, Cygames was – rightly, as it turns out – bullish about its chances. "We actually weren't that surprised by the success of *Rage Of Bahamut*," producer and executive director **Yuito Kimura** tells us. "We put everything we had into making a good game, so we were pretty confident in it during development. I think the reason people enjoyed it is that while the experience was quick and simple enough to be enjoyed on the move, that simplicity masked considerable depth in the overall game design. As a company we also take great pride in the quality of our artwork and of course the game was a great showcase for that too."



Producer Yuito Kimura is the man behind Cygames' three big hits: *Rage Of Bahamut, Granblue Fantasy* and *Shadowverse*

Some of that artwork was revisited in 2016's *Shadowverse* – in part, Kimura explains, to encourage brand recognition. It has, he says, helped western players in particular realise the connection between the two games. But in the meantime, Cygames had turned its attention to a different genre. *Granblue Fantasy* was conceived as an attempt to bring a traditional turn-based RPG to smartphones – and the developer chose two big names to give the game the prestige feel of a classic-era JRPG. *Final Fantasy* legend Nobuo Uematsu contributed more than half of the themes for the game's soundtrack, while Hideo Minaba, art director for *FFVI* and *XII*, among others, was responsible for a wide range of character designs. Its gacha system, whereby players buy crystals for a random character drop, naturally attracted some controversy – Cygames was quick to head off complaints about one rare character's drop rate by offering refunds – but it's undoubtedly been a factor in its ongoing success. By its two-year anniversary, it had surpassed 10 million downloads; a further 18 months on, it's still huge, with story and character updates keeping players hooked, and an anime series helping to widen its reach. "Obviously it was developed by some names associated with some of the very best Japanese RPGs, but we think we've done a pretty good job of adapting and adding to that experience so that it can be enjoyed on mobile phones," Kimura says modestly.

"WE PUT EVERYTHING WE HAD INTO MAKING A GOOD GAME SO WE WERE CONFIDENT IN IT DURING DEVELOPMENT"



Founded 2011
Employees 1,766
Key staff Koichi Watanabe (president), Yuito Kimura (game producer and executive director)
URL www.cygames.co.jp/en/
Selected softography *Rage Of Bahamut, Granblue Fantasy, Dragon Quest Monsters Super Light, Shadowverse*
Current projects *Princess Connect! Re:Dive, Umamusume: Pretty Derby, Lost Order, Zone Of The Enders: The 2nd Runner M RS, Project Awakening, Granblue Fantasy: Project Re:Link*

With *Rage Of Bahamut* retaining a strong following, expectations were high for Cygames' next release, and *Shadowverse* didn't disappoint: within a month it was the most popular collectible card game on mobile platforms. "When we set out to make *Shadowverse*, the core concept behind it was evolution," Kimura says. "We really wanted to take what we had done with *Rage Of Bahamut* and evolve it for smartphones." To which end, it recruited some of the world's best *Magic: The Gathering* and *Hearthstone* players to assist with the game design. This wasn't simply about making a more western-friendly style of card game, but one with the kind of depth to keep an audience entertained for some time. The studio's plans for *Shadowverse* are certainly ambitious. "We want to keep the community going for ten years or more, which is one of the reasons that we continue to add to it," Kimura adds.

Already it's introducing new expansions every three months, with regular updates for story content, and, where necessary, balance adjustments to maintain the equilibrium of the metagame. In such a competitive market, regular updates make sense as a way to retain an audience, but Kimura says there's more to it than that. "Updates are also necessary to maintain the strategic depth of the game. Every new card expansion introduces new deck types, new artwork, new story elements and we also run new tournaments around each expansion." It is, he concedes, a challenge to keep pace with users' hunger for fresh content. "But we're proud of





***Rage Of Bahamut*'s early success – it topped the US Google Play revenue charts for 16 weeks – convinced DeNA to purchase a 24 per cent stake in Cygames worth more than $90m. Now it has several subsidiaries of its own, including art and animation studios**

our success in doing so: as mentioned earlier, many of our games have been around for several years now, but on top of that we're also busy developing new titles, and expanding our game worlds across manga, anime, and so on."

While *Shadowverse* shares some similarities with *Hearthstone*, it's a game where random elements noticeably feature less heavily. Is that a cultural consideration, we wonder – would Japanese players be less accepting of such factors than westerners? "We do make an effort to keep RNG low in *Shadowverse*, but I don't think that is a cultural difference," Kimura says. "It's more that by keeping RNG low and aiming for a very skill-based game we hope to sustain the *Shadowverse* community in the long term.

"There is always luck involved in any card game, and it is impossible to eliminate it completely," he continues. "But we are very proactive about looking at data to keep the game balanced. And it is not just in terms of the matches themselves – we also hope to give players the deck-building tools that they need to minimise RNG in the metagame too – skilful players can build decks that minimise the impact of luck, or they might even decide to gamble by, for example, building a fast-paced aggro deck and taking a calculated bet that their opponent won't be playing a control deck built to counter it."

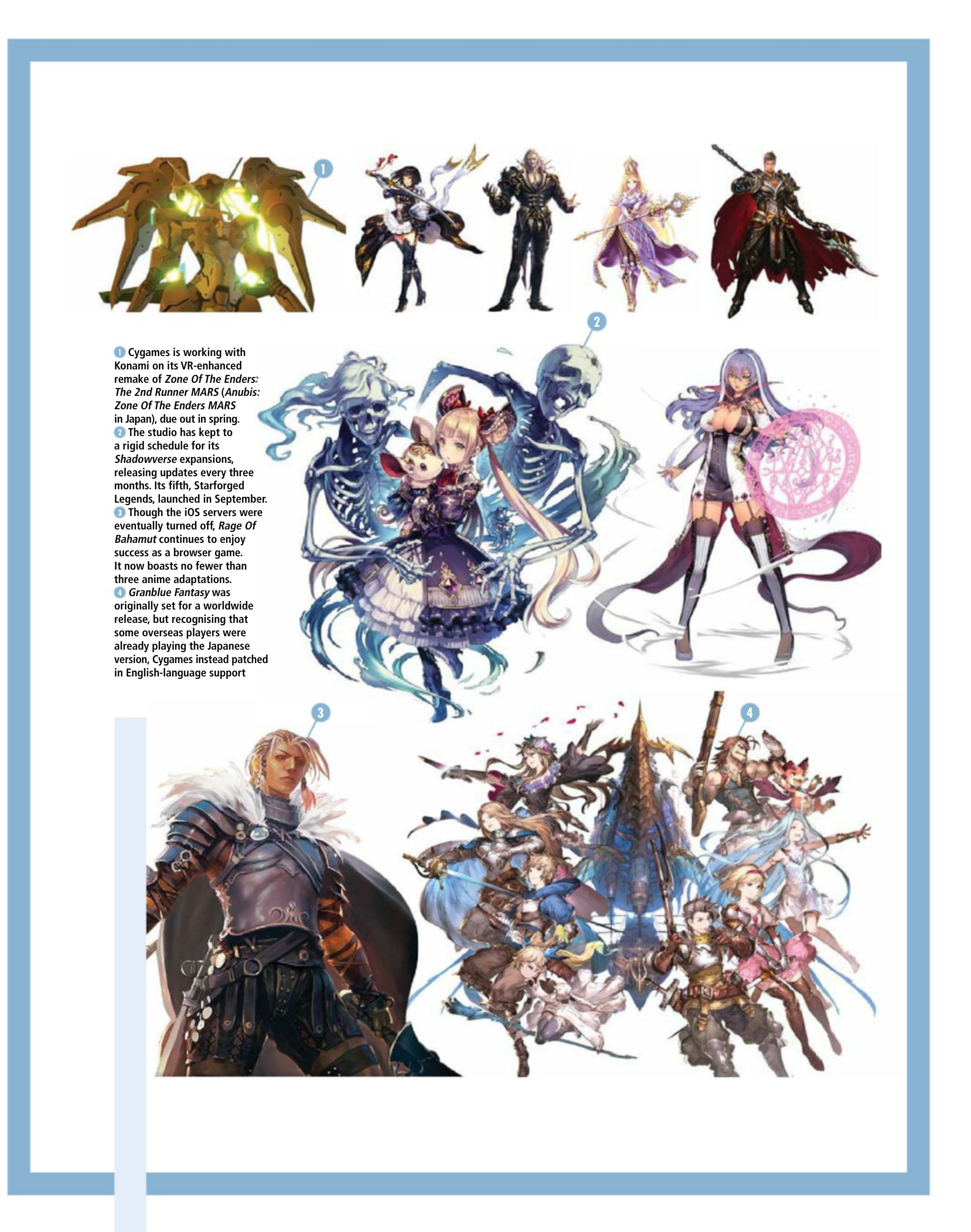
In a territory that has been relatively slow to embrace esports, this attention to fine detail is just one factor in *Shadowverse*'s exceptional success in the field. For Cygames, it was a natural next step from "the concept of evolution that inspired the game", as Kimura puts it, and it's clear esports is central to the studio's ten-year plan. "In Japan we already have an ecosystem that supports everything from small-scale tournaments to large-scale offline tournaments, and while we are still building that in the west we recently announced prizing support for community tournaments." He hopes this year's World Grand Prix, in which the best *Shadowverse* players will compete for a prize pool of $120,000, will attract a global audience to help broaden its appeal overseas. Its popularity at home can be summed up by this year's *Shadowverse* Festival, which occupied half the floor space that the entire Tokyo Game Show used at the same venue.

By comparison, Cygames' attempts to match its home-grown success overseas have had mixed results. Despite *Rage Of Bahamut*'s encouraging early sales, DeNA turned off the servers for the international version in early 2016. "It's always a difficult decision to shut down a game, especially one that has such loyal fans as *Rage Of Bahamut*," Kimura says. "But we hope that we can keep providing great content for those fans, whether it is through other media like manga and anime, or new games like *Shadowverse*." Regardless, it's clear it isn't about to give up on the western market anytime soon: *Shadowverse* keeps popping up at major events, including E3 and PAX West, and its sponsorship of three of the world's best-known fighting game players, forming a team called Cygames Beast, is not only demonstrating its commitment to esports, but helping raise its global profile. That the company's logo will appear on the shirts of Serie A champions Juventus certainly won't do any harm in that regard, either.

On the development front, Cygames has plenty more irons in the fire. The most immediately exciting of these is *Project Awakening*, its first large-format console game. Having achieved considerable success in the mobile space, it makes sense for Cygames to look to replicate that elsewhere, though given the predominance of smartphones in Japan – and the expense of making console games – its timing could be seen as unusual. Not as far as Kimura's concerned. "We want to create great content for people on whatever platform makes sense for that content," he says, "Whether that be consoles, manga, anime, or mobile phones. Obviously consoles allow us to create a very different type of experience." It's not the only console project in the offing, either: VR game *Zone Of The Enders: The 2nd Runner MARS* earned a predictably enthusiastic reaction during its showcase at this year's Tokyo Games Show.

"THERE IS ALWAYS LUCK INVOLVED IN ANY CARD GAME, AND IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO ELIMINATE THAT COMPLETELY"

Though hardly the first Japanese studio to seek to recreate its strong domestic performance abroad, Cygames seems better equipped than most to do so. Whether it's via expansions into esports, sponsorship deals, a more aggressive western push for *Shadowverse*, or its upcoming console releases, it seems this enterprising developer will soon be a name on everyone's lips. "It's not so much that we are inspired by the success of other Japanese companies overseas," Kimura says. "It is more that we are inspired by the desire for as many people as possible to experience our content and to enjoy it." The company vision, he says, is to make 'the best in entertainment'. It seems Cygames is well on its way to achieving that goal. ■



1 Cygames is working with Konami on its VR-enhanced remake of *Zone Of The Enders: The 2nd Runner MARS* (*Anubis: Zone Of The Enders MARS* in Japan), due out in spring. 2 The studio has kept to a rigid schedule for its *Shadowverse* expansions, releasing updates every three months. Its fifth, Starforged Legends, launched in September. 3 Though the iOS servers were eventually turned off, *Rage Of Bahamut* continues to enjoy success as a browser game. It now boasts no fewer than three anime adaptations. 4 *Granblue Fantasy* was originally set for a worldwide release, but recognising that some overseas players were already playing the Japanese version, Cygames instead patched in English-language support

PLAY

REVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. INTERVIEWS. AND SOME NUMBERS

STILL PLAYING

Stardew Valley Switch
Is this the perfect platform for our favourite farming sim? Maybe so. We've sunk many more hours into building our blueberry empire here than we ever did on PC or console. Docking the Switch to plan crop formations on the big screen works well, while handheld mode is ideal for zoned-out fishing sessions in front of the TV: Joy-Con rumble feedback on bites means we barely even have to look at the screen. Bliss.

Destiny 2 PC
With three console characters at or near the level cap, and *Destiny 2*'s endgame offering little to lure us back, we feared we were done. Then along came the PC version, with its uncapped framerates, 4K visuals and HDR support. We won't be here for long, but if this is to be it for us and *Destiny 2* until the DLC arrives, at least we're finally seeing it in the best possible light.

Super Mario Odyssey Switch
One of the very few notes of sadness that comes with getting games early is not being part of the excited conversation on launch day; you miss the hype train entirely, because you got to your destination weeks earlier. We're still playing, of course. We'll be playing this one for a while, in fact. And in the meantime, while we may not be talking about it with the rest of you, rest assured we're reading as much as we can.



Explore the iPad edition of **Edge** for extra Play content

REVIEWED THIS ISSUE



Endless space

Sometimes it's hard not to think of the modern videogaming audience as a kind of bottomless maw. Nowadays, accustomed to the niceties of thumbsticks and min-maxing, we munch through content at an alarming rate. (*Destiny 2* director Luke Smith rather hit the nail on the head in **E**312, comparing it to binge-eating a big bag of crisps.) Plenty of big studios have observed this behaviour and drawn an inevitable conclusion: the bigger, the better.

New series entries must balloon in size, they figure, in order to fulfill the growing appetite for *more*. We see not a city, but an entire country, in *Assassin's Creed Origins* (p100). A vast Egypt is teeming with life – and sidequests, collectibles and optional combat challenges, crafting materials and colour-coded gear. It's as if Ubisoft is daring us to say we're bored. *Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus* (p104) has opted for a more open approach to Nazi-nixing. *Middle-earth: Shadow Of War* (p112) has accepted the challenge to a detrimental degree, its sheer volume of stuff to shuffle about rather numbing.

Even survival horror sequel *The Evil Within 2* (p108) has widened its view. Well, yes, the black bars *have* gone – but we're really referring to the hub levels, which provide breathing room between tense linear chases. Sadly, poor execution doesn't provide much incentive for stretching the legs. But while the reduced car count of *Gran Turismo Sport* (p118) might indicate a prioritisation of quality over quantity, this time, the overall step taken is too far backwards, rather than outwards. Thank goodness that *Cuphead* (p114) has emerged, from a flurry of forums demanding more content than 'just boss fights', mostly undiluted from its original vision. We might crave scope, sure, but focus truly satisfies.

Assassin's Creed Origins

See those pyramids? You can climb them. The view from the top of Giza's wondrous monuments makes the ascent worthwhile – indeed, the setting is one thing *Assassin's Creed Origins* gets wonderfully right. Weathered by age, they're looking a little rough on the outside, though handily the cracks in the stone are arranged in such a way as to let you scamper up without much effort. Still, despite the superficial damage, it's clear the foundations are still pretty solid. If only the same could be said for the game itself.

Which isn't to say that Ubisoft hasn't tried to shake things up a bit. The last time this series took a gap year we got *Assassin's Creed II*, a game which rewrote the rules and established a formula to which the publisher would closely adhere until 2015's *Syndicate*. By which time – and despite the efforts of Evie Frye, the most likeable assassin since a certain charismatic Italian got three games to himself – returns were undeniably diminishing. A change was required, then, but given an extra year it seems Ubisoft hasn't so much tried to establish a whole new identity for *Assassin's Creed* as to create a kind of Frankenstein's monster, pulling ideas from a range of popular games and attempting to stitch them together. The results are, predictably, patchy.

In a way, that's oddly appropriate, since these are tumultuous times for a declining nation. We're at the fag end of the Ptolemaic dynasty, and Egypt is steadily being pulled apart from within. The pyramids are just one sign that the edifice is crumbling. We witness the power battles of the era: the sibling squabbles between Cleopatra and Ptolemy XIII, and the rivalry of Caesar and Pompey. It's a world in which the divide between the haves and have-nots could hardly be more stark, where the rich and the opportunistic exploit the poor to improve their personal standing, and where a secretive order is using the turmoil to further its own ambitions.

It's the perfect time, in other words, for another hero to rise up against these corrupt elites. Enter Bayek Of Siwa. Before *Origins'* protagonist is drawn into any political chicanery, he's motivated by something far simpler: revenge. After a clumsy introduction, tragedy strikes, and he's set on a path that takes him from his humble village home towards Alexandria and Memphis – sporadically accompanied by his wife, Aya. The trajectory is immediately apparent from the menu screen, which makes it clear we're at the base of a pyramid of targets and we'll steadily be working our way up, but Ubisoft contextualises the villains rather better than before. That they're each nicknamed after animals helps: tracking The Snake and The Crocodile is naturally more exciting than being given a name you'll likely have forgotten within moments. For each of the main story missions, you're introduced to the often devastating impact these figures have had on the local community, providing all the motivation you need to

Developer/publisher Ubisoft (Montreal)
Format PC, PS4 (tested), Xbox One
Release Out now

> The series has always featured light RPG elements, but they're much more prominent here



carry out the hit. One particularly disturbing underwater discovery will have you ready to draw your blade before you've even identified your target's whereabouts.

But you'll have to be patient, and not only because sneaking around is the preferred option for most of the game's assassinations. This series has always featured light RPG elements, but they're much more prominent here than before. Tellingly, the default setting on a fully customisable HUD shows exactly how much damage you're giving or taking, with each blow you land or absorb accompanied by a numerical value. And you're given a suggested level for each quest, with entire regions – albeit mostly on the outskirts of the map – essentially out of bounds, since you'll be woefully unprepared to deal with any of the threats within. If the Creed's maxim suggests that 'everything is permitted', it's clear Ubisoft has little desire to pay much attention to it, and that this supposedly open world has clearly established boundaries from the start.

That in itself is nothing new, of course. We've played plenty of RPGs where it's possible to wander into dangers beyond your current abilities. But even along the *Origins* story path, your choices are limited. Supposedly optional side quests are all but mandatory, since you're warned that tackling a mission two levels below the game's recommendation is a bad idea. That is, unless you've spent time harvesting resources to increase the damage Bayek can deal or withstand: the hides of slaughtered animals, and materials either looted or gained by junking unneeded weapons, can boost the power of his arrows, his bracers and his armour. Yet none of these incremental stat increases have quite the same impact as simply levelling up. Visiting new places gives you a small amount of XP, but since venturing outside your comfort zone is rarely advised, exploration alone isn't going to get you far.

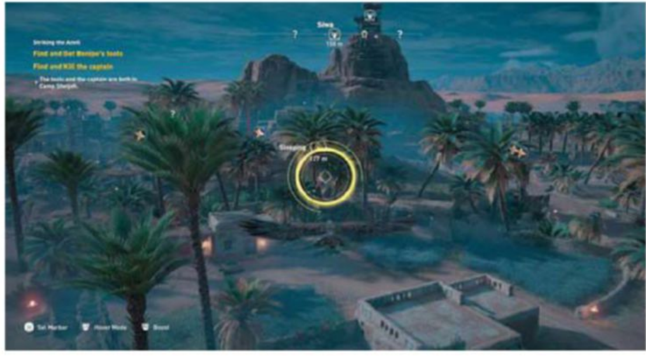
Most missions, critical or otherwise, settle into a predictable rhythm. There's sometimes an investigation phase where Bayek plays detective, wandering around a local area in search of some conveniently highlighted evidence. Then, in a very literal interpretation of Eagle Vision, Bayek's pet Senu can be called upon to fly above bandit camps and guarded strongholds when you're within the vicinity of your objective. Somehow, she's capable of highlighting guards – and, via a later upgrade, their patrol routes – as well as pinpointing the position of the key personnel you've been asked to rescue, and more substantial loot caches, too. Though it's unusual (not to mention completely preposterous) to be doing all this as a bird, functionally she's no more than a feathered version of *Watch Dogs 2*'s quadcopter: a living, screeching recon drone.

With enemies now clearly outlined, and not only predictable in their movements but dim-witted to boot, ▶





ABOVE You can reduce the prominence of the UI, which seems designed as much for screenshotters as it is minimalists. It's worth keeping a few elements active, though: *Origins* isn't really designed to give so little away





MAIN Bayek and Aya's relationship offers some welcome light in a game that's often pretty bleak. Sarah Schachner's excellent score fits the sombre mood, with a recurring six-note motif providing a haunting refrain. **ABOVE** Bayek's eagle, Senu, can't swoop too low when scouting enemy territory, but she can be called upon to harass individual foes, providing a distraction for you to sneak by unnoticed. **LEFT** Rare weapons are more common than their name suggests if you're reasonably thorough in your looting. You'll need to pay a local blacksmith to upgrade your best kit to match Bayek's level, but decent alternatives aren't particularly hard to come by

stealth is obviously the path of least resistance. Then again, even this approach is dependent on your level, since normally fatal hidden attacks won't result in an instant kill. Otherwise, only clumsiness will lead to combat, whether you've missed an enemy during your flyover, or whistled at the wrong time and alerted two guards to your hiding place. At which point, *Origins* attempts to mimic *Dark Souls*, with a shield on the left bumper, a light attack on the right, and a stronger one on the trigger. It's clear Ubisoft is aiming for a mix of responsiveness and weight, but these loose, jerky encounters fall uncomfortably between the two. Still, once you've landed enough blows you can launch a devastating single attack or trigger a rage mode of sorts. An ability that lets you start battles with this already activated proves sufficient to deal with most mobs, though if you've alerted any archers or troops on horseback, beating a retreat is the best tactic – few pursuers are especially persistent.

You quickly sense that Ubisoft doesn't really want you to play the whole game as a silent assassin; otherwise, why would it offer you rare and legendary weapons as rewards? Besides, investing your hard-won skill points into stealth leaves you ill-equipped to deal with missions with forced combat. And stealth abilities often seem designed to compensate for messing up. Poisoning corpses damages nearby enemies, but that only comes in useful if you've been spotted – at which point, you'll be wishing you'd spent those points on combat skills. Any RPG is a numbers game, and the most obvious evidence that *Origins* hasn't balanced its books comes during escort or protection missions. An 'ally health low' alert will pop up if your colleague is in



STALK LIKE AN EGYPTIAN

Unless you're riding away from a group of enemies, Bayek's bow rarely seems particularly useful in combat. Many enemies are shielded, and shooting guards from distance is likely to alert others – particularly since even direct headshots don't guarantee a kill. Still, a leisurely hunt is one of *Origins*' more enjoyable side activities, and a later unlockable that gives you the chance to guide an arrow's trajectory mid-flight lets you pull off some satisfying long shots on even the quickest of Egypt's beasts. Whether you're selling hyena skins or accumulating crocodile hides to buff up your defences, everything has a value, though ornithologists might not be too pleased with the number of requests that require you to kill herons. There's a good reason for it, however: their feathers are used in rituals for the dead – and Bayek encounters plenty of corpses on his journey.

Oddly, smaller boats take more effort to turn than large ships, which you'll control in a handful of sea battles. You'll command archers to shoot volleys of fire arrows, with weak points of enemy craft handily highlighted in red

trouble, but if they die, they'll simply get back up again after a short while: surely a tacit acknowledgement that the figures don't quite add up.

The story and the setting are *Origins'* saving grace. While sporadic performance issues blight the base-level console versions, Ubisoft's environment designers have surpassed themselves. Many of the villagers in Egypt's pocket communities eke out a grim old existence, but there's a widescreen grandeur to the bigger picture – and the ability to let your horse or camel automatically follow the road to your destination lets you take it all in as you ride along. It's hard not to capture a beautiful image in the game's photo mode, but even without pausing the action there are moments to make you gasp, such as when you find yourself lazily steering a felucca down the Nile beneath the blazing sun, sending flocks of herons and flamingos scattering. Meanwhile, as Bayek, the excellent Abubakar Salim finds light and shade in what could easily have been a one-note avenger. His relationship with Alix Wilton Regan's equally engaging Aya hits some strikingly unconventional notes, this loving couple slowly yet amicably drifting apart as events push them down separate paths.

Origins seems similarly conflicted. Its world may be memorable, but otherwise this is a series falling back on borrowed ideas, as if unsure quite how to properly reinvent itself. There are enough signs of improvement to suggest the next entry could yet be the fresh start Ubisoft promised this time around. But as a new beginning for *Assassin's Creed*, *Origins* is more of a stumbling step than a bold leap forward.

6

Post Script

Is it time Assassin's Creed left its present-day stories in the past? (contains spoilers)

Really, it's all Ezio's fault. Once Signor Auditore Da Firenze swaggered onto the scene in *Assassin's Creed II*, sweeping players off their feet with his roguish charm and swashbuckling swordsmanship, it was clear that boring old Desmond Miles stood no chance. Not even two games in, and Ubisoft's attempt to meld present-day sci-fi mystery with historical conspiracy had been waylaid by a young Italian nobleman who single-handedly made the latter far more exciting than the former. Even the daring cliffhanger ending to the first game, with its arcane scribblings and portents of imminent catastrophe, couldn't compete. Players lapped up Ezio's adventure, and demanded more – and Ubisoft duly delivered, with two well-regarded sequels that saw the series start to spin off its original axis.

Even so, Ubisoft was evidently still keen on its original conceit and the ongoing manoeuvres of the Templars' corporate front, Abstergo. Over the course of the next three games, it tried various ways to win its audience over to its contemporary plotline. This eventually culminated in the entertainingly ludicrous finale to *Assassin's Creed III*, which saw Desmond killed off, having sacrificed himself to save the world. His DNA was used to trigger the historical sequences of the fourth game, *Black Flag*, but by now the focus was firmly on the past. By 2014's *Assassin's Creed: Unity*, the Animus had been repurposed into a VR game machine, the real-world player recast as an in-game one; a year later, *Syndicate* followed suit with a similar story.

Yet there are signs in *Origins* that Ubisoft doesn't simply see the present-day sections as a vestigial limb – though since it's such a vast game, they add up to a tiny fraction of the total playtime. Here, you control a new character, Layla Hassan. She's a former Abstergo employee gone rogue, who has set up her own portable Animus machine in a cave in Alexandria, where Bayek's remains lie. And yes, that means she's using DNA from his mummy to tap into his past; her version of the Animus, you see, lets her access anyone's genetic memories, including ancestors with no direct connection to the user. Hassan's playable sections are short, but through dialogue and phone conversations a picture soon emerges of a brilliant, courageous but foolhardy and naive scientist, whose meddling has inevitable consequences as Abstergo tracks her down. She's forced to rely on techniques she's inherited from Bayek during her time in the Animus to escape in a brief but tense encounter.

It's when you access her PC, however, that the plot really begins to thicken. It's tantamount to a huge exposition dump, albeit a reasonably well-written one. We see emails from a close confidant, concerned that the effects of this untested device might end up frying her brain. Documents provide us with her personal thoughts on Bayek's mission (and Hassan's complaints about headaches and more frequent misspellings towards the end suggest her friend had a point). There's plenty, too, for long-term fans of the series to sink their teeth into, with archived emails, an employee manual and NDA from Abstergo, along with a medical report and further – apparently stolen – documents about Desmond Miles. Even so, much of this will be fairly meaningless to those unfamiliar with the whole story. Besides, it's been obvious from the start that Abstergo isn't what it pretends to be; it's not clear why we're supposed to find it exciting when another character discovers what we've already known for several games.

This is a series that distinguishes itself with its evocative reconstructions of history rather than its systems



The way it's resolved – happily, before Bayek's own story concludes – leaves more questions than answers. An unexpected reveal and a final encounter with a key figure from the series' past results in Hassan being offered a proposition that seems hard to realistically refuse. But does this mean she'll return in future games? Or is this simply a way of establishing a narrative reasoning for the Animus being able to connect its users with any historical figure, genetic links be damned?

Perhaps this is all leading towards the chance to play as an Assassin in a present-day setting, though that would seem to be a grave mistake on Ubisoft's part – particularly in light of *Origins'* strengths and weaknesses. This is a series, after all, that distinguishes itself with its evocative reconstructions of history rather than its systems, which here include ideas from the likes of *Watch Dogs*, *Far Cry* and *Destiny*. Shorn of its one defining feature, it would be harder still to distinguish it from its peers.

Whatever the reason, Hassan's story, though compact and relatively enjoyable, still feels slightly unnecessary: an obligation to please those who still enjoy the meta-story but not much more than that. Surely it would be far better, from now on, to simply keep the Animus as one of gaming's great get-out-of-jail-free cards. Since the beginning of the series, this historical Matrix has afforded a range of familiar game contrivances – like convenient barriers and anachronistic interface overlays – an in-fiction excuse for their presence. We're not sure it quite excuses some of the glitches we saw during our time with *Origins*, mind. The low-poly placeholder character model, squatting within a cave; the teleporting quest-giver; the apparently injured NPC, who promptly parkoured up the nearest rock face when we briefly set him back down. Still, they did say that this portable Animus might result in a few unexplained anomalies. ■

Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus

The New Colossus doesn't have the challenge of reinventing *Wolfenstein*, as its predecessor once did. Instead, it has to build upon a surprising act of originality. Propelling BJ Blazkowicz into an alt-1960s where the Nazis won the war, *The New Order* was not simply a good shooter – it was an accomplished feat of writing and worldbuilding, managing to find a place for humanity alongside hyperviolent Nazi science-horror.

This sequel begins at the moment that game ended, building out from BJ's success against the Nazis in Europe to begin a new campaign in America. A recap of the events of *The New Order* gives way to an inventive opening, where a crippled Blazkowicz attempts to fight his way out of a submarine in a wheelchair. This set-piece level is beautifully implemented, creative, meaningfully impacts the way you play, and has a measure of wit to it: it is emblematic of the successes of the first game, and makes for a promising start.

Unfortunately, there's a sense of 'difficult second album' to the campaign that follows. Some strong art direction struggles to differentiate samey Nazi facilities, and set-piece environments, such as a post-nuclear New York, can't quite overcome the fact that 'ruined America' is a far more familiar theme for games like this than '1960s European Reich'. At its lowest ebb, it resorts to playing the hits: a sequence where a disguised Blazkowicz is interrogated by a Nazi officer in a New Mexico diner is a less effective re-run of the moment in the first game where you're cornered by a Nazi official on the night train to Berlin. A later attempt to repeat one of the first game's most spectacular reveals is undersold and falls flat, and there's no attempt to match the scale of *The New Order*'s biggest moments.

Instead, *The New Colossus* zooms in on the small details and doubles down on its designers' cinematic ambitions. Extraordinarily detailed environments, particularly on board Blazkowicz's submarine base of operations, tell the stories of the people who occupy them. Focused technical direction imbues both combat and smaller human moments with believability, showcasing an attention to detail that consistently manages to lift the experience out of mediocrity.

There's a lot to like about the writing, too, with a strong central cast, good performances, and a dedication to ensuring that there are always characterful moments to discover as you explore home base between missions. Yet the tone of *Wolfenstein* has never felt more at odds with itself than it does here. Attempting to build upon the first game's horror element, *The New Colossus* presents, often graphically, both physical and psychological violence, pushing beyond the bounds of grindhouse Nazi terror to feature domestic violence, racism, and child abuse. These moments are effectively presented – in that they're deeply unpleasant – but these themes and their consequences go underexplored

Developer MachineGames
Publisher Bethesda
Format PC, PS4 (both tested), Xbox One
Release Out now

The script doesn't grant any of its characters the freedom to stray too far from cinematic caricature



as the game abruptly snaps back to bloodthirsty Nazi-slaying, character comedy, Blazkowicz's meandering folk-poetic internal monologue, or one-off meditations on America's own troubled history.

The script also doesn't grant any of its characters the freedom to stray too far from cinematic caricature: MachineGames pushes everything up to 11 with verve, but meaningful diversity requires a defter hand. *The New Colossus* is better than the majority of games in this regard, and that's commendable, but it doesn't exempt its flaws. These stylistic successes and failures define *The New Colossus*, which is robust but unspectacular as a shooter. As in *The New Order*, corridor combat with an arsenal of familiar weapons is mingled with more open sections where assassination of key officers allows you to cut off the enemy's reinforcements. This is easier said than done, however, and both level design and AI frequently conspire to make firefights the more likely outcome.

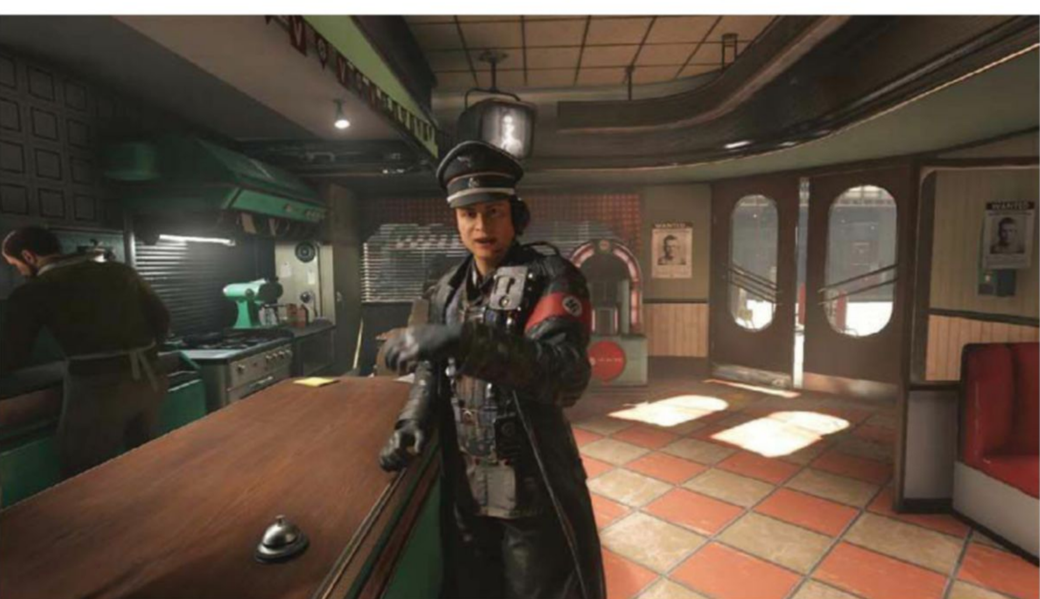
Despite its bombast, *The New Colossus* is all too quick to punish players who approach it like *Doom*. Maintaining maxed-out health and armour encourages cautious exploration, and even when at full health our hero can be downed with a few solid bursts of fire from a basic footsoldier. It makes direct engagement a big risk: you might want to sprint the length of a corridor, shotgun in each hand, but this is rarely sustainable.

It's odd that the experience of playing *Wolfenstein II* is so frequently opposite to its tone. A cutscene will happily deposit you into a last-stand situation against an arena full of Nazis, Mick Gordon soundtrack at your back, and you'd be forgiven for thinking that this was a situation that MachineGames expects you to Duke Nukem your way out of. Instead, you'll likely die half-a-dozen times before you figure out the correct sequence of pillars to hide behind while you cautiously thin the pack. Trial and error is the rule, and while liberal use of quicksaving and quickloading can ameliorate some of the frustration, this feels like a stop-gap solution.

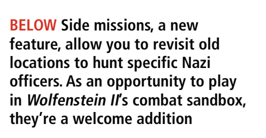
This is compounded by a plot conceit that restricts you to half of your health pool for a sizeable amount of the campaign. There's a strange turning point, deep into the game, where your health is fully restored and you gain access to new abilities and, suddenly, everything becomes much easier – and remains so. As ever with this series, there's the temptation to view this as a deliberate stylistic decision, but what exactly the game is trying to say remains elusive.

Like its predecessor, *The New Colossus* is a stunning technical achievement and an unusually stylish act of videogame cinematography. Yet where the first game gleefully took a scalpel to what had come before, there's no old order for *The New Colossus* to overthrow: just a *New Order* that it struggles to live up to.

7



ABOVE ***The New Colossus*** **is a strategic shooter, despite the hyperviolent presentation. Frequently outgunned, success comes from caution – and a degree of trial and error.**
LEFT First-person cinematography is becoming a MachineGames hallmark, but feels less fresh here than it did in ***The New Order***

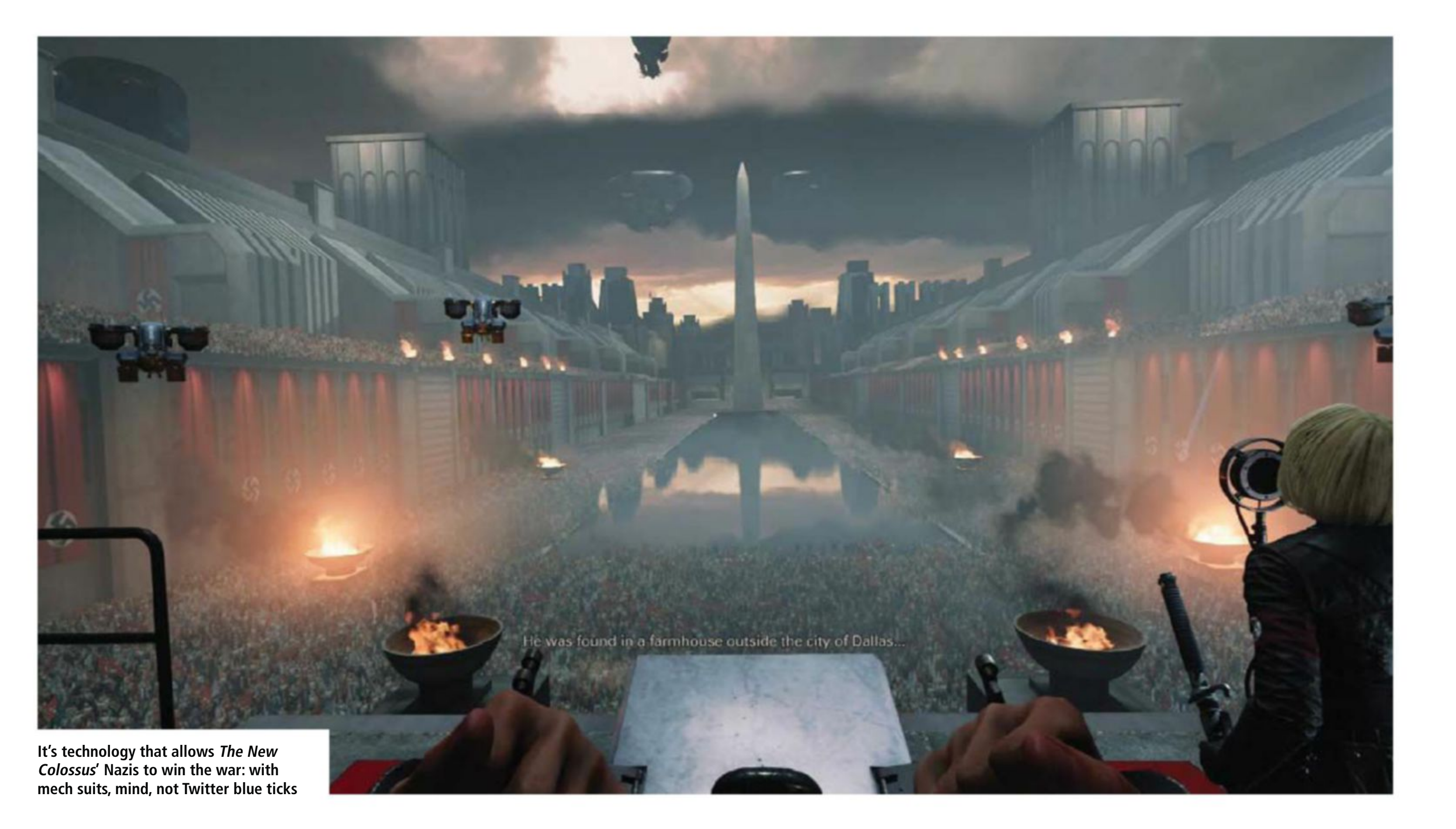


BELOW Side missions, a new feature, allow you to revisit old locations to hunt specific Nazi officers. As an opportunity to play in ***Wolfenstein II*****'s combat sandbox, they're a welcome addition**



ABOVE Scenes that play out on board Eva's Hammer – "the crown jewel of the Nazi U-Boat fleet" – are well-presented but rarely interactive: Blazkowicz's role is that of mere observer while you're in control





It's technology that allows *The New Colossus*' Nazis to win the war: with mech suits, mind, not Twitter blue ticks

Post Script

Why The New Colossus' portrayal of modern Nazism needs a reality check

Bethesda's marketing campaign for *Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus* has enthusiastically embraced the notion of the game's topicality. Trailers quoting Trump draw a line between *The New Colossus'* Nazis-in-America theme and the resurgence of white-supremacist movements in the US. This is an uncomfortable fit for a game that will have been in production long before last year's election: it is a demonstration of corporate allyhood at best, opportunistic marketing at worst, and likely a little of both. Yet the ways in which the game does not match the expectations established for it are worth unpacking: they speak to the ways in which *The New Colossus* struggles to fully realise the ideas it entertains.

Set in 1961, the game depicts an America that has been under Nazi occupation for more than a decade. New York is a wasteland. New Orleans is a walled-off ghetto for dissidents, and Washington has been rebuilt in brutalist Nazi concrete. Despite America's submission to Nazi rule, however, fascism is depicted throughout the game as an invading force. Nazi dominance is maintained from the top down, relying heavily on a handful of cruel ideologues at the top of the pyramid. Their technological dominance is crucial, too: Nazis came to rule America first through the use of the atom bomb, and then through the roaming threat of a huge, heavily armed flying fortress.

Although plenty of Americans are depicted as coexisting with the Nazis, every single person wearing a Nazi uniform in *The New Colossus* is German: and not just German, but stereotypically, theatrically German. Nazism is presented as a specifically national phenomenon, a condition viciously imposed upon Americans that can be levered off with sufficient force. All of this – the narrow cadre of leaders, the technology, the sense of a revolution waiting to happen – suits *The New Colossus'* aims as a videogame and a cathartic fantasy story. All of them, however, align *Wolfenstein*'s Nazis more closely with *Half-Life 2*'s alien Combine than with the reality of white-supremacist movements.

The game does go some way, however, towards establishing that while Nazism is German, prejudice is not. A plot point establishes that much of the southern United States is governed by the Ku Klux Klan, who happily coexist with the invaders. Americans are shown to have sold out their neighbours, and a few collectible documents make further references to homegrown prejudice. These include a specific allusion to the media's initially coy treatment of the alt-right movement last year, which suggests that MachineGames' writers were able to be more reactive in the game's flavour text than they were with its broader plot.

In practical terms, however, these themes don't quite stick. Klan members are enemies in certain side missions and are, elsewhere, presented as ridiculous and submissive to Nazi power. BJ's abusive father is the game's other vector for the expression of American racism, but even he is larger than life. An angry Texan salesman who dresses like a rancher, he is strikingly presented but his behaviour is extreme in every regard. *The New Colossus'* message – and the ultimate flaw in the notion that it stands up as a 'game for our times' – is that fascism wears a uniform, whether that's a swastika, a bedsheet, or a bolo tie. It brutally depicts the extremity of human evil but neglects its banality.

It is to the game's credit that it engages with these themes at all, of course, and moments where it articulately touches on other themes, such as America's own relationship with militarism, or the gendered language used to describe courage, are welcome and worthy of further exploration. Yet there's a sense that games, and particularly this type of game, struggle to do more than touch on these ideas before thundering on down the next corridor. ■

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The Evil Within 2

Developer Tango Gameworks
Publisher Bethesda Softworks
Format PC, PS4 (tested), Xbox One
Release Out now

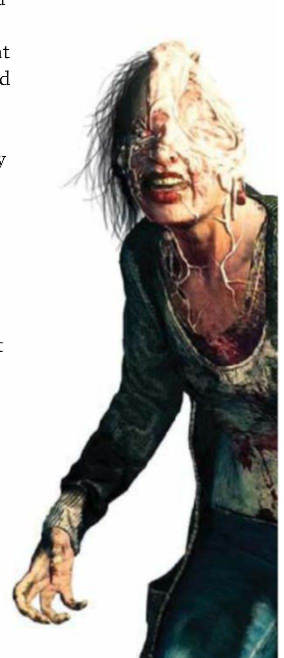
The black bars are gone. For some, that'll be good news: whether you believe it was an artistic choice or one enforced by technical limitations, the letterboxed presentation of *The Evil Within* left some players feeling caged. Enough demanded a fullscreen option that Bethesda subsequently patched it in, but we weren't convinced the change was for the better, believing the 2:35:1 aspect ratio contributed to the game's oppressively claustrophobic feel. This follow-up expands the game's boundaries in another sense, too, incorporating large, open outdoor areas between the cramped, fright-filled corridors of its interiors. It's a sequel that stretches out in every sense, then, but in doing so it ends up spreading itself thinner.

At least it doesn't start so sluggishly. After his ordeal in the first game, Sebastian Castellanos is encouraged to take another dip in the VR bathtubs of the STEM machine by double-agent Juli Kidman. His daughter isn't dead, it transpires, but needs rescuing from a world called Union, a simulation of a smalltown idyll which doesn't exactly match the brochure. It's less disorientating than the original's bewildering plot, and fleshes out its universe through documents, slides and chewy dialogue. In giving us more to go on, though, it loses some of the fear factor: after all, the unknown and the inexplicable will always be scarier than the explicit. And if Sebastian's character was thinly sketched before, turning him into a generic grizzled action dad with guilt issues isn't much of an improvement. There's a nice line in self-aware humour, however, notably when our hero realises his allies are mostly field technicians. "Combat isn't my forte," says one. "Seems to be a running theme," is the growled response.

Fortunately, Castellanos can handle himself in a fight, though until you've reduced the natural sway of his aiming arm on the upgrade screen once or twice you might have your doubts. Combat has the same backed-into-a-corner tension of the first game, but for different reasons. There are no traps to disarm and put down, and no matches to burn downed corpses. Instead, the pace has been stepped up: the mutants that populate Union might seem to suffer from severe myopia, but once they do spot you they'll close the gap with alarming speed, and they'll often require several headshots before they drop. Once they're grounded, you can stomp them into pulp to save precious rounds. Staggering them, oddly, seems to grant them temporary invulnerability: you'll see bullets clearly landing but having no effect, forcing you to delay that follow-up shot for a second or so. Not a problem when you're facing a single mutant, but they don't tend to come in ones.

The alternative is stealth. This time you can pin yourself to objects by squeezing the right bumper, though it tends to be a bad idea, limiting an already narrow view even further, and sometimes refusing to let you manoeuvre properly around the side of an object, either flat-out resisting or suddenly clipping you through it. You're far better staying close to cover and crouch-walking around it, like a crab with a shotgun. It's not always wise, since AI behaviour is as unpredictable as it is dim-witted: the kind where you spend a good while isolating and stalking an opponent, until, just as the 'sneak kill' prompt is about to appear, it turns around suddenly. Upgrades that quicken crouched movement and quieten your footsteps help, but one which lets you rush toward unaware enemies is so expensive you'd have to neglect the other skill trees for the rest of the game, or reserve it for New Game+. There are a few others like this, and the game is more generous with the ability-boosting green goop on a second playthrough, empowering you to mop up everything you missed with fewer sticking points.

You're far better staying close to cover and crouch-walking around it, like a crab with a shotgun



On your first run, it's as stingy with supplies as the original, which means opening every drawer and smashing every crate you see – at least when you're out of earshot. Crafting is perfunctory, simply giving you more buttons to press before you can slide another clip into your pistol. It does, however, introduce an intriguing dilemma when you're in a tight spot, letting you use resources on the fly, albeit at a much higher cost than at a workbench in Union's handful of safe houses. Here you'll find NPCs that send you on side-missions, via a walkie-talkie of sorts that can be tuned to track objective markers, hidden stashes, and residual signals from recent events. In other words, the kind of thing we've seen and done plenty of times elsewhere.

Still, when your communicator isn't crackling, and Sebastian is left to face a range of horrors without any help, *The Evil Within 2* hits its stride. If the sense of disease and decay isn't quite as palpable thanks to a lack of particle effects and a brighter palette, its imagery is consistently striking. A leering photographer-cum-serial killer frames corpses at the moment of death in artfully grisly 3D stills, before sending his pet, a giant camera balanced on butchered body parts, to hunt you down. And, among the groaning monstrosities with too many heads and limbs, one of the scariest threats is something much simpler: a bald woman with a knife, whose bloodcurdling shrieks are just one way the exceptional sound design works its macabre magic.

Otherwise, it's only fitfully successful. Even its highlights often riff on the likes of *The Last Of Us* and *Silent Hill*, and a third-act reprise of three boss fights from the original sums up the absence of anything truly new. For all its flaws, *The Evil Within* felt like the work of a singular voice. This feels like several shouting at once, eventually settling their differences by compromise. The black bars are gone; instead, it's convention that keeps *The Evil Within 2* constrained.

6

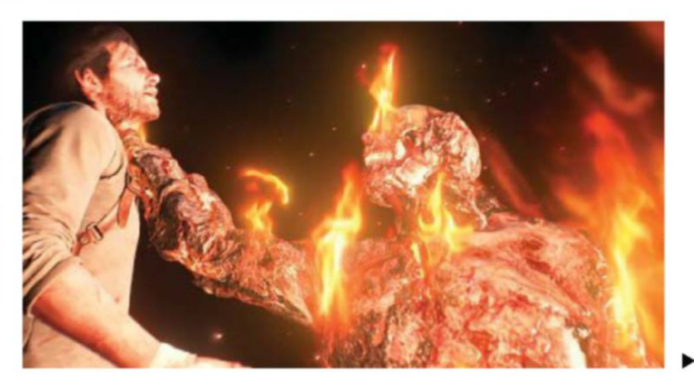


ABOVE Sometimes, the game meets expectations of familiar horror scenarios; at other times, it denies you the anticipated payoff. It's at its best when it seems to establish a rule that it goes on to break. **LEFT** Mockingly described as "the ultimate reward", letterboxing is unlocked as an option for a second playthrough. Since the game hasn't been built with borders in mind, it's not really much of a bonus

BELOW Castellanos remains remarkably calm in the face of all these horrors. Then again, he's less frequently flummoxed by the sudden environmental changes that were a regular feature of the first – and they're missed here



ABOVE The words of a psychotic villain, or an undervalued art director? Either way, we do. Still, it lacks some of the original's tangible grubbiness





This all-seeing eye has thick tendrils that slam down into Union's streets, dropping larger opponents that are best avoided

Post Script

Why The Evil Within 2 isn't suited to being the outdoor type

The Evil Within 2's third chapter is where it begins to stretch its legs, with the first of three large outdoor maps welcoming you to Union – or what's left of it. It's not an open world in the strictest sense, since the fractures in its foundations force you to head underground to the Marrow, a network of tunnels that connect these disparate areas. But it still feels like an open-world game, since it rehashes a number of ideas from other thirdperson sandboxes. Not all are unwelcome, but the game is at its weakest whenever it ventures outside, these spaces proving an awkward fit for survival-horror systems.

The idea is to scavenge for supplies while tackling side missions along the way. Pulling out your handheld communicator reveals distant signals, which you'll need to face to tune into their frequency. Then it's a case of pulling up your mini-map, marking your destination and making your way there while avoiding the attentions of marauding mutants. You can take them on, of course, but since one of the reasons to explore further is to gather resources so you can stockpile them for trickier encounters, you don't want to waste too much ammo.

For the most part, stealth is the way to go, then. While enemies are short-sighted, you still need to give them a fairly wide berth, since their awkward, jerky movements can be hard to read, and there's always the possibility of them turning your way at any given time. Since the cover system is so capricious, you'll often find yourself heading for the many convenient patches of long grass, wherein Sebastian becomes a glowing silhouette to let you know he's hidden. Yet the foliage limits your view to such a degree that it's hard to see what's on the other side. And though enemies are stupid, once they've caught sight of you they're irritatingly persistent: you can't expect to simply retreat into the vegetation and hope they give up the ghost.

Sometimes it's easier just to let yourself be killed rather than carrying on. A mutant's growl is likely to attract others to your position, and the whole thing turns into a farce as you end up trailing a conga line of enemies. Castellanos might not be as hopelessly unfit as he was in the first game, but he can't sprint for long, and so any distance you put between you and your pursuers will be closed once his stamina gauge has emptied. The whole thing ends up feeling silly, and any tension quickly evaporates.

At times you've no choice but to engage, but dealing with a group of enemies can essentially leave you back at square one, the last 20 minutes of foraging yielding resources you spend in two minutes of combat. If you can corral several into a tight cluster, you can kick over an oil barrel and set it alight with a pistol shot, or electrify puddles with bolts from your crossbow. But that's a big if – though they're dumb enough to be distracted by a thrown bottle, their erratic movement rarely means they're exactly where you want them.

It's not as if wandering off the beaten track is really optional. During one boss fight, we run around for 10 minutes gathering handgun rounds as they sporadically spawn, since our shotgun is next to useless on an opponent capable of one-hit melee kills if we get too close. Reloading an earlier save, we find a sniper rifle outside that makes the ensuing encounter laughably easy. So much for balance.

It's telling that the best rewards for exploring are the optional set-pieces that occur when you enter a building. One, involving a haunted jukebox and an unexpected return to Castellanos' past, is a creepy standout, but the tedious tracking missions where you follow the traces of Castellanos' daughter Lily are more typical of the objectives you can expect. When you're more focused on marking waypoints or locking onto targets rather than worrying about what's around the next corner, you're no longer playing a horror game. ■

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Middle-earth: Shadow Of War

Well, that's Shag The Corrupt off our to-do list. To clarify, that's an enemy, not an instruction – he's an orc captain, an Epic Cursed Mystic Assassin no less. He's now on our side, in fact: we've delicately cajoled him into joining our army, and now he's going to help us claim an enemy stronghold. And to think we knew him back when he was Shag The Gut-Ripper. They grow up so fast.

In other words, the Nemesis system is back. *Shadow Of Mordor*'s ingenious central idea established a reactive hierarchy of orcs, lending thrilling dynamism to an otherwise serviceable open-world game. It's at the heart of *Shadow Of War*, too, and delivers many of the game's best moments: when you watch a persistent foe rise through the ranks, emboldened by the time he cut you down, and belatedly exact your revenge. Or when you convince a rival to become your bodyguard and he steps in to block an attack that would surely have killed you.

They have an even more important role this time, as the game's second act asks you to form an army capable of taking on Sauron's hordes. It's a while before you get there, mind, since throughout the opening hours you'll be playing a game that's remarkably similar to its predecessor. In some ways, that's no bad thing: it's a useful on-ramp for newcomers, and those who simply wanted more of the same are amply catered for until the game opens up. A clutch of new moves and skills – notably, an acrobatic double-jump that speeds up exploration – helps, though you can't help but wish the game would get to the point a little quicker.

Eventually, via a glaringly signposted reveal, it does. The world stretches far beyond the boundaries of opening regions Minis Ithil and Cirith Ungol, with one territory even enjoying uncommonly blue skies and pleasant weather – certainly by Middle-earth standards. It brightens up in another sense, too. Antipodean ally Bruz The Chopper adds some welcome humour to the gloominess, which is handy since he's essentially a walking tutorial for the game's new siege battles, which charge you with sacking a fortress, and replacing its current warlord with one of your own.

But first you'll need to use your Dominate ability to bend orc captains to your will, attacking them until their health is low enough to prompt a faintly terrifying sequence where you aggressively threaten them into joining you. If they're too powerful, you can choose to humiliate them instead, reducing their level at a cost of letting them flee – though they're unlikely to put up as much of a fight when you hunt them down. Any new recruits can be beefed up by sending them to tackle the region's remaining captains, in raids you can either watch or help out on. Alternatively, you can send them on infiltration missions, proving their worth in fight pits to convince enemy chiefs of their value, before calling on them to stab their new employer in the back. Eventually your collective attack power will be sufficient to assault an enemy base and hopefully claim it for your own.

Developer Monolith Productions
Publisher Warner Bros
Format PC, PS4 (tested), Xbox One
Release Out now

In the end, even the Nemesis system has become nothing more than another checklist



TOLKIEN HEADS
Having to take on so many side activities scuppers the pacing of an otherwise absorbing story. Human allies Idril and Baramor – a couple willing to risk their necks to save others – are likeable, but their appearances are often hours apart. Troy Baker puts in a typically robust performance as Talion, pitched somewhere between Sean Bean's turn as the flawed but fundamentally decent Boromir and Viggo Mortensen's stolidly heroic Aragorn. But attempts to paint him as a gruff saviour figure flounder when every five minutes you see him squeeze the head of a terrified orc until it pops. Indeed, this is one of the most savagely, relentlessly violent games we've ever played. Perhaps it's intended to show how easily we can justify horrifying means for a noble end, but it makes you feel pretty grotty all the same.

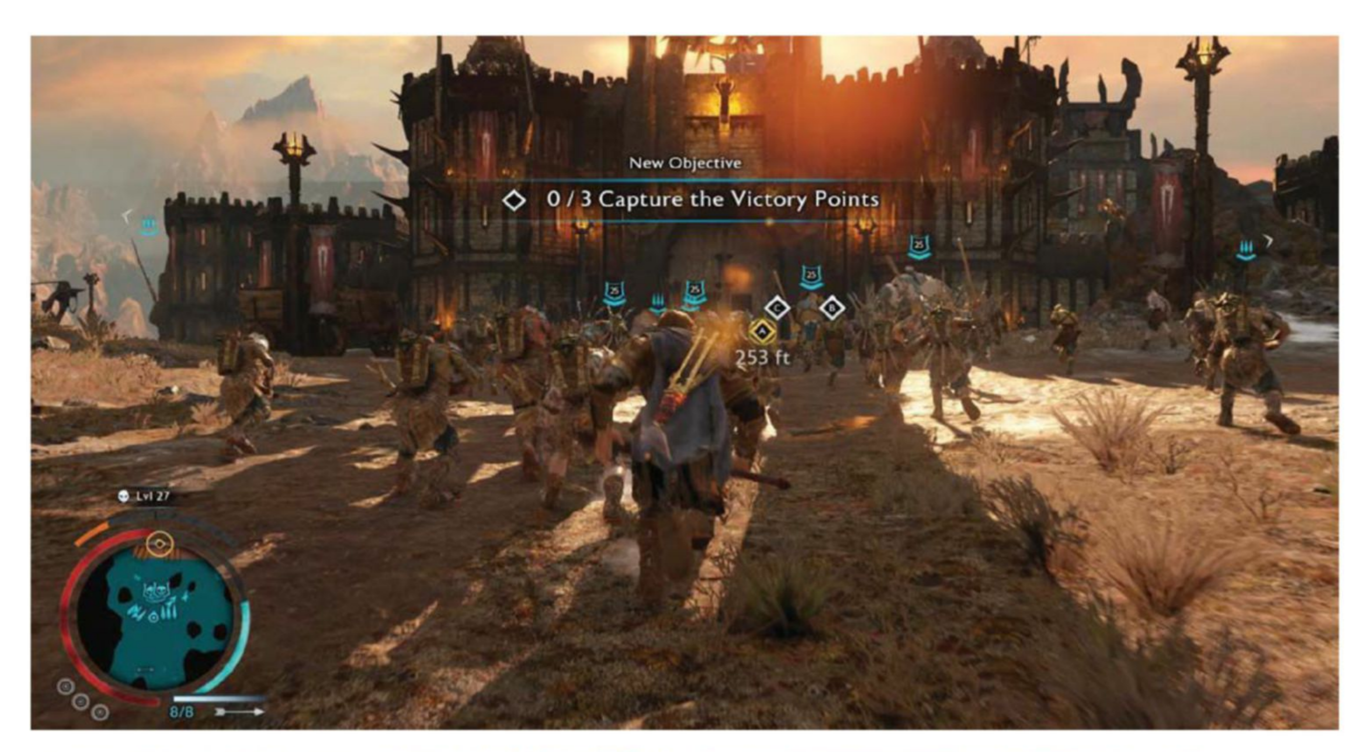
The slow build-up, and the cutscene that follows your decision to attack, make your first siege feel like a real event. With trolls smashing the outer walls, as you scale the parapets, slicing up archers and leaping down just as the drawbridge is demolished, Monolith approximates the widescreen grandeur of the battle sequences in the film trilogy. Yet you can't gawp too long: your job is to seize several well-guarded capture points before entering the keep to confront the warlord.

At this point your hired help strangely chooses to leave you to it, forcing you to fight a much stronger individual alone. Naturally, you could go away, tackle some XP-boosting side-quests and level up a bit, but in doing so you make the first part of a siege laughably easy. Go in less prepared, on the other hand, and you'll find yourself having to nanny your so-called helpers, reviving them constantly as they get smacked down by superior opponents. Or you could spend long hours raising their level through side activities. Then again, it's probably quicker to buy loot boxes until you get a rare or legendary general to lead the charge. If you're not simply focused on story quests, you'll likely earn enough in-game currency to open a few without spending real cash, but you do wonder if the wonky balancing isn't simply a way of encouraging players to splash out just to save some time grinding their way to glory.

By your fourth siege, the appeal has worn thin, the spectacle no longer alluring. Even as the engine impressively copes with the crowds, you'll find a number of technical flaws besides. Accurate targeting is a crapshoot: in the middle of a combo, you'll inexplicably turn round and slash one of your own, while mapping jumping, sprinting, sliding and climbing to the same face button invariably means it picks the wrong option for you at times. Summoning sporadically fails without rhyme or reason, and enemies make inexplicable errors: Rug Skin-Peeler sounded rather threatening until he wandered into a flaming hedge from which he couldn't escape.

On and on it plods. Those devious early tricks have long since exhausted their novelty value, and the last meaningful ability was unlocked some hours before, the skill tree vainly relying on light modifications to ones you gained ages ago to hold your interest. In the end, even the Nemesis system has become nothing more than another checklist, as you grimly tick off orcs one by one: humiliated, beheaded, died, recruited, decapitated, survived. A game of this size may please those who equate volume with value, but despite a handful of sensational moments, *Shadow Of War* mostly proves that more can be so much less.

6







ABOVE A pal of Galadriel's, Eltariel is a nimble mercenary who wields a mean bow. Her appearance is little more than a cameo, really: her role in Middle-earth will be more thoroughly explored in a later expansion

MAIN Any named orcs you've convinced to join you are marked in blue. If their health is depleted during siege attacks you're notified that they're bleeding out; you're given plenty of time to restore them to fighting fitness.
ABOVE You don't need to be present to start taking a capture point, but you're responsible for finishing the job, tapping the D-pad to slam your weapon down in a Gandalf-aping flourish.
RIGHT Mounted combat feels slightly scrappy, but Caragors are naturally handy against opponents who are terrified of beasts. They can be commanded to devour downed enemies to regain health



Cuphead

An improbable union of vintage animation and arcade-era challenge, *Cuphead*'s art and design seem to be rather at odds with one another. It features some of the most astonishing hand-drawn animation you could wish to see, and places it within a game where being distracted by such antic detail leads to failure. It has the kind of immediate aesthetic appeal to attract a broad audience, yet it's wedded to the kind of unflinching difficulty only a small niche of players will be able to fully appreciate. The result is an unmissable game that can't be recommended without serious caveats. Yes, *Cuphead* is quite the paradox.

The first rule of *Cuphead* is rather more relaxed than its Fight Club equivalent. You can certainly talk about it, but to discuss particulars is to do the game – and its potential players – a huge disservice. It's why Studio MDHR has been touting around the same slightly underwhelming demo of the game for ages. It wanted to preserve the game's secrets for as long as possible. And when you play it, you begin to understand why.

Its story setup is handled economically. Cuphead and his friend Mugman – player two, if you have a willing partner – have forfeited their souls to the devil thanks to a dice roll. The pair strike an alternative deal, the devil giving them until midnight the following day to collect a series of signed contracts for the souls of his debtors, which range from mutant vegetables to pirates, inflatable clowns to pugilistic amphibians.

It's a series of boss fights, in other words, spread across three islands, with the challenge steepening as you advance. Some encounters are locked off when you first enter a new hub, but usually there's more than one option available to you at any given time. For a palate cleanser, you might fancy tackling the odd *Contra*-esque run-and-gun interlude, which represents a welcome change of pace, albeit not in difficulty. We already know they were added later in development after concerns about variety were raised during early previews, and one gravity-flipping sequence aside, that's quite apparent. Still, they fulfil a purpose, and while they're technically optional you won't want to skip them – since each holds five coins that can be spent at an in-game shop, unlocking new weapons, perks and special abilities.

Each battle begins with the ceremony of a classic cartoon short. A title card names your upcoming opponent and also offers a pun for the battle itself. Then an announcer comes in with a snappy soundbite, before Cuphead prepares to, well, die quite a bit. With three health points – one equippable perk ups it to four, at the cost of some attack power – and no checkpoints, there's little room for mistakes, nor for manoeuvre against opponents that dwarf our hero and can stretch or bounce across the entire screen. Two minutes or so might not seem like a long time, but every second seems to last an age. The exception is a slightly static opening set-to that gives you more room to admire the art but proves misleadingly genteel.

Developer Studio MDHR
Publisher Microsoft Studios
Format PC (tested), Xbox One
Release Out now

A love letter to the early history of two mediums – imperfectly written, perhaps, but deeply and sincerely felt



DON'T MUG YOURSELF
Struggling to make headway? You can attempt the fights on the Simple difficulty. Though that name should probably be brought up under the Trades Description Act, it's true in a relative sense – often removing the final phase of a fight entirely, or at the very least rearranging attack patterns to make them a little more manageable. But as a result, you won't earn the contracts you need; as such, the extended finale, which features a boss rush and a diabolic final encounter, remains out of bounds. There's no option to tackle the run-and-gun levels on an easier setting, nor the three brief Mausoleum stages which test your parrying abilities against waves of ghosts. Defeat them all and you'll earn a new Super ability: the second, which conveys temporary invincibility, is probably the most useful.

After the first island – and certainly midway through the second – you'll likely conclude that Studio MDHR should have stuck to its original plan. There's certainly no shortage of variety here: you'll face a single-screen skirmish and then an airborne side-scroller. A battle that plays more like a one-on-one brawler will be followed by another that requires careful platforming throughout. What they all have in common is an exacting challenge, with threats coming in twos and threes. Lunges from your assailant might coincide with a volley of missiles from elsewhere. One boss fires an ovoid bomb that explodes offscreen, the debris splitting and re-entering from behind you. And yet Cuphead himself is a capable, athletic hero, equipped with a reliable jump, a brisk lateral dash and an arsenal that ranges from peashooters to charge shots, short-range spread fire to homing bullets. The default controller configuration, however, does him no favours, with dash, jump, shoot and special bound to the four face buttons. Map shoot to one of the triggers and dash closer to jump, though, and you're laughing.

Well, eventually. At various points you'll be convinced that this is where you're going to have to call it a day. After each failure you're shown a progress bar, letting you know just how close you were to victory – or how far you were from it. It's hard to know whether it's more demoralising to fall just inches from the line, or to see you still had two more phases to beat. With little feedback beyond that you'll wonder if the effort is worth it. But then your opponent collapses in anguish, the announcer returns with a triumphant "Knockout!" and you exhale, elated – and not a little relieved.

It's a sensation you'll chase again and again, your pulse keeping time with an energetic soundtrack that pairs brassy melodies with percussive flourishes. Each attempt comes to feel like a high-wire act; each mistake a precarious wobble on the tightrope. The inevitable fall doesn't always feel like your fault: a parry, triggered by jumping again in mid-air to bat away lurid pink projectiles, can feel capricious in its timing. Tucked away in a corner, the special meter it tops up is hard to effectively follow as the action heats up. And when it does, the random elements that lend a spontaneity and unpredictability to each new attempt can combine in ways that leave you unable to avoid harm.

Yet frustrations rarely linger in a game with such a bright, celebratory vibe. This is a love letter to the early history of two mediums – imperfectly written, perhaps, but deeply and sincerely felt. Charming, distinctive and impossible to forget, *Cuphead* is the kind of game you'll immediately want to talk about, yet be desperate not to spoil. Like we said: quite the paradox.

8

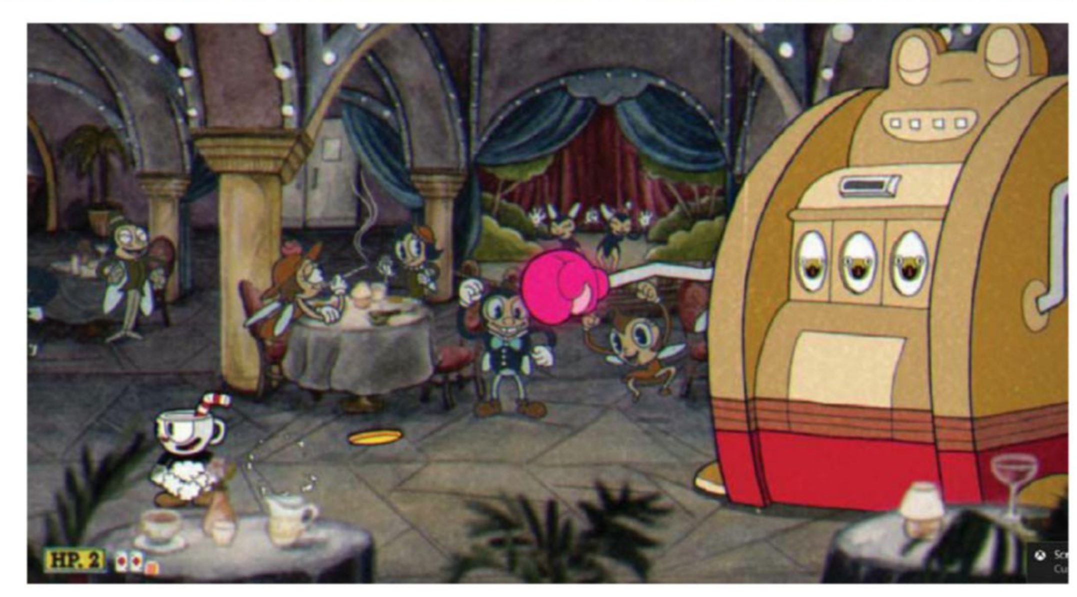




ABOVE There's an apparent nod to *Wonder Boy* in the game's eye-patch-sporting, moustachioed porcine shopkeeper, whose guttural growl as he greets you is equal parts terrifying and hilarious



TOP *Cuphead*'s flying stages are generally more forgiving, with one notable exception. Here, dashing shrinks your plane, increasing your ability to dodge but limiting your attack power and range.
MAIN It's not always clear what you can and can't safely touch. As a general rule, steer clear of anything with eyes and/or teeth.
RIGHT Taking the time to master your parry timing pays off. Though during early encounters it's mostly optional – merely letting you finish off a boss quicker by filling your special meter faster – it's vital if you want to survive later battles



Forza Motorsport 7

Developer Turn 10 Studios
Publisher Microsoft Studios
Format PC, Xbox One (both tested)
Release Out now

Driving is theatre in *Forza Motorsport 7*, an orchestrated spectacle designed to be savoured from the best seat in the house: the driver's. Few racing games achieve the sweeping breadth and fine tuned presentation of Turn 10's latest. The globe-trot of historic circuits; the litany of incredible cars; and the conditions, too, from scorching sun, to monsoon rains, to floodlit nights. The combined package is a pristine, pacey and accessible racing game that perhaps delivers a more exhilarating drive than its more steadfast contemporaries, but isn't without its problems.

The number tells you everything – this is a familiar, gently iterative entry in a series that has learned from most of its prior mistakes, as well as taken lessons in personality from its livelier offshoot, *Forza Horizon*. *Forza Motorsport* has always offered scale, but *FM7* takes that to new levels – *Gran Turismo Sport*'s 150-odd vehicles now looks paltry by comparison to the 700-strong garage. The same goes for its track roster, which still delights with iconic real-life circuits and a peppering of fictional ones amidst some of the world's most picturesque backdrops: the dramatic peaks of the Bernese Alps, the gothic sprawl of Prague, the higgle-piggle high rises of a vibrant Rio de Janeiro.

The new star track jets you off to Dubai and the Circuit Of The Emirates, which meanders its way through the rolling dunes and up into the tight, winding crawl of a rocky pass. It's here, in the oil-laden deserts of the UAE, that Turn 10 first showcases its immaculate new stage production – a one-lapper in the raucous new Porsche GT RS2. This is a technical masterwork on console, running at a flawless 60fps that lends silky satisfaction to every perfected apex.

That's quickly followed by a truck race around the joyous chicanes at Mugello and a monsoon trial at Japan's Suzuka circuit in a Nissan GT. It's in this three-act snapshot that *Forza Motorsport 7* sets out its three core tenets – speed, versatility and adaptability – and introduces you to the structure of its new Driver's Cup. This is a career that's more focused, while also being broader in the types of motorsport it features, and splits up its five major tiers into mini championships. You're free to choose which events you enter, and will likely find enjoyment where you least expect it. From souped up Hyundai hatchbacks, to classic old Chevy muscle; from a top-spec hyper car prototype, to a Ford Transit with player-applied go-faster stripes.

Instead of punishing you until you've practised like other, more purist sims, this is faster and more energetic than real life, but it does so in a way that never feels unrealistic. Every car feels like you imagine it would on a real track, albeit exaggerated – the turning circle of a classic muscle car is very different than the nimble controls of Formula E, for example. Assists, meanwhile, can now be changed mid-race. It's a game that prioritises on-circuit enjoyment over under-the-hood accuracy but without forgetting the latter, and that is a wonderful thing when balanced this expertly.

The combined package is a pristine, pacey and accessible flagship racing game that delivers an exhilirating drive

The huge career – which offers everything from three-lap races, to longer Endurances, to ten-pin bowling with cars around the Top Gear test track – excels in rolling out something for you to enjoy at any given point. But it's marred by the addition of 'prize crates' (you can probably guess what they are) and the proliferation of mods. The latter were introduced in *Forza Motorsport 6*, but they're far more ubiquitous here. This all combines into a progression system that's needlessly complex. You earn points by completing races, which gets you closer to unlocking the next tier of the Driver's Cup. Completing these races also moves you closer to your own driver's ranking, which in turn gives you another tangible reward – your choice of a stack of cash credits, perhaps, or a discount on a car – which nets you more progress in another meter: your collector's ranking. Or it can be a cosmetic item such as overalls for your helmeted avatar.

It's a bizarre setup for a number of reasons, not to mention the cynical implications of its paid-for elements. The cosmetic items are mostly, if not wholly useless, while the prize crates and mod cards just don't slot into the mix elegantly enough. Mods themselves vary in style and effect, but they're all designed to meet the same goal: getting you more stuff much quicker while nerfing the cash rewards you get if you play without activating them. We often forget they exist at all, for the most part, and that's despite the amount of time we spend in the menus. Thank some pretty arduous load times for that.

That leads us to the PC port, which in its current condition can't be ignored. While *Forza 7* is visually stunning across the board on whichever platform you happen to be playing, it's technically inconsistent on Windows. It suffers from stutters both on track and off, making the already slow and clunky menus even more unpleasant to navigate through, and some races unplayable. There are crashes to desktop, and when the thing does finally run, load times can be intolerable. We can't blame Turn 10 for a system-level problem that persists across many of Microsoft's UWP games, but a PC version should be the technical standard bearer, not languishing at the back of the pack.

That's a huge shame because, providing you can overlook the progression system quirks, *Forza Motorsport 7* is a fabulous racer. It's gargantuan and not even fully feature complete, with Turn 10 yet to switch on its Leagues and Forzathon modes. There's an incredible amount to do within the confines of a traditional racing game. Flawed, then, but pushing for the top of the podium all the same.

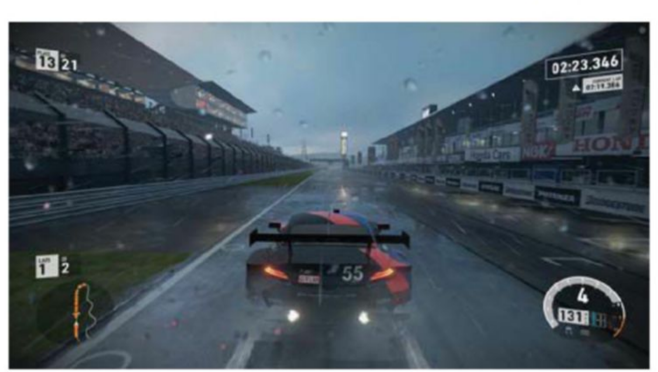
8



ROAD WARRIORS
As well as some of the best driving in the business, *Forza Motorsport 7* has made some great improvements to its AI. It's not perfect by any means, and your opponents will regularly pile, en masse, into a first turn to create an unavoidable pile-up. They're also prone to sticking side by side in an unrealistic formation for the majority of a first lap. But they make realistic mistakes, and in places you'll likely find difficult to master yourself – there's some delicious schadenfreude watching your opponent up front run wide into a gravel trap, or having a tussle with another driver and watching as they end up wedged into a tyre barrier.

RIGHT As well as the traditional cockpit view, Turn 10 has also added a new camera perspective that shifts you past the steering wheel, decluttering the screen. BELOW The new weather effects look superb, but aren't dynamic. Some tracks have rain or night-time variants, but bright sunshine is largely the order of the day. MAIN A first corner pile-up is pretty common, but *Forza 7*'s damage model is the best its ever been. A hard enough shunt or bump can make the rest of your race difficult







ABOVE If the serious business of the Driver's Cup isn't your thing, free race lets you rent cars – though you can't customise them. There are few finer pleasures than racing a borrowed Merc GT along the roads of Brazil



Gran Turismo Sport

Developer Polyphony Digital
Publisher SIE
Format PS4
Release Out now

Gran Turismo wasn't like other driving games. Its devotion to realism sent a shockwave across the industry in 1998, as did the unprecedented opportunity it offered to take a family saloon and replace its parts until it could smoke a TVR off the start line. Up in the rarefied air Polyphony Digital has occupied ever since, the studio has enjoyed the freedom to seemingly work at its own pace, and to take Sony's blockbuster racing series in esoteric and, at times, frustrating directions. In that sense, *GT Sport* is the quintessential *Gran Turismo* game: a late arrival to PS4 defined by a collection of curious design decisions.

A change of direction was to be expected after *Gran Turismo 6*'s puzzling appearance on PS3 in 2013. Its 1,197 cars formed a sort of motoring encyclopaedia, but one that was comprised largely of PS2 refurbishments. That disparity between car models spoke to a deeper problem with the game, which seemed in two minds about whether to continue to deliver its legacy features or offer something brave and new – ultimately doing neither with any particular flourish. Enter *GT Sport*, a game that protects itself from similar criticism by offering something brave and new to an almost confrontational degree. That collection of cars it had been hauling from platform to platform is gone. In its place is a fresh roster of 162 vehicles, each lovingly crafted from headlight bulb to interior stitching. As expected, handling is the strongest asset *GT Sport* has by a mile, enough to warrant investigation from any sim-racing afficionado, and to reward them on those fundamental terms. Still, it's hard not to lament the loss of so many classic cars, Japanese curiosities, familiar affordable hatchbacks and licensed racing prototypes which filled the garages of previous games.

This is no longer a game about car ownership or collection, however. The singleplayer championships that previously offered the primary appeal have been usurped by a series of driving lessons and challenges, which take place in preordained vehicles on set tracks. Previously, these were components of the series' driving-licence challenges, a means to unlock more prestigious and lucrative championships. Now they take top billing in a choice of just two solo modes, the other being quick Arcade races. This is the first fundamental misunderstanding on Polyphony's part: repeatedly driving two corners for a gold trinket isn't enjoyable, nor does it make the player a better driver. What this solo content is trying to do is prepare would-be racers for the demands of online racing, but in reality it was the old *Gran Turismo* experience of battering AI foes in a turbo-charged Mazda Demio that taught better racecraft, and imprinted racing lines more indelibly.

Where Polyphony's unquestionable talents do still shine through, though, are in the presentation and execution of that content. It might seem like a minor point to sing the praises of menu screens, but the passion for motorsport they convey is infectious. Meanwhile, the actual on-track element is the best *Gran Turismo* has ever seen. Braking distances are much more realistic, and the sense of weight and torque which has always been exemplary is articulated here better than ever. Ironically, AI behaviour has turned a corner too, but there's little chance to sample its newfound aggression.

Repeatedly driving two corners for a gold trinket isn't enjoyable, nor does it make the player a better driver

Online racing is *GT Sport*'s raison d'être, then. Not just that, but a particular brand of stern, competitive online racing in the *iRacing* mould, clearly intended as an esports platform in the fullness of time. For casual racers there's Lobby mode, full of player-created free-for-alls, but there's no doubt that Sport mode is where the real focus lies. Governing the entirety of this part of the game is an omniscient virtual adjudicator which decides the Driver Rating (speed) and Sportsmanship Rating (fairness) of each player based on performance, and over time matches players of similar grades. As in *Project Cars 2*, the idea is that unsportsmanlike players end up being matched with each other, while those who want to race fairly and cleanly are eventually separated from the bumper-botherers.

After a week of unwavering commitment to clean racing, however, we're still tarnished with a D-grade Sportsmanship Rating. Due to the game's understandable inability to apportion blame for racing mishaps, this rating is adversely affected if you hit someone, but also if you're the one being hit. The same goes for time penalties. Perhaps this seemed like an elegant solution in an air-conditioned design meeting, but in actuality it empowers trolls in flame-retardant overalls to wreck not just the current race for others, but also their chances of being matched with anyone more sportsmanlike. Still more perplexing is the scarcity of available races in this mode. At the time of writing, there are only three daily events to compete in and they begin at fixed times, the upshot being you can take part in a maximum of three races per hour. Entry to one of three championships is available too, but as we send to press, they still haven't taken place.

To nobody's surprise, Polyphony has once again summoned an eerily realistic driving experience here, but one that struggles to wrest back the limelight with its paucity of things to do. There's a prevailing sense that Polyphony hasn't yet shown its hand with *GT Sport*; that there's something more substantial waiting to be added to this sparse framework via post-release updates and an inevitable GT Academy competition. Perhaps this is a prologue by another name, filling in a gap before *Gran Turismo 7*. Whatever it becomes in time, the *GT Sport* of right now is defined by the features it leaves on the cutting-room floor, rather than those it adds.

6



LA FERRARI EN ROSE
The spirit of vehicle customisation is alive and well in *GT Sport*, albeit with a more aesthetic bent than before. Cars, helmets and overalls can all be edited with player-created liveries which show up in multiplayer races and will eventually form an online library of user content, to be downloaded at will, as in recent *Forza* titles. It's a powerful tool that will undoubtedly spawn convincing real-life replicas and Batmobile skins in equal measure. It also sows the seed for future esports racing teams to compete in their own liveries, and for fans of those teams to show their allegiances by racing in team colours. We're just content forcing everyone to witness our punishingly gaudy lime-green-and-magenta overalls and helmet after taking the chequered flag.



LEFT Fetishise steel and rubber, fiddling with apertures to your heart's content, in a typically meticulous photo mode.
MAIN Finally, AI drivers who aren't afraid to cross the line. The days of 20-car overtaking manoeuvres are, for better and worse, in the past.
BOTTOM It's a handsome game, but not one that's streets ahead of *Project Cars 2* or *Forza Motorsport* in overall fidelity levels





ABOVE Oval circuits perhaps best demonstrate Sport mode's inability to strongarm racers into sportsmanlike conduct. Instead, they end up turning most of the game's races into a never-ending cavalcade of penalties



Fire Emblem Warriors

Well, we weren't exactly anticipating a walking simulator with rhythm-action sections. We're kidding, of course: *Fire Emblem Warriors* is pretty much exactly the game we expected it to be from the moment it was announced. The established *Warriors* template hasn't suited every franchise Omega Force has draped over it, but *Fire Emblem* slips on a treat here, the fiction of Intelligent Systems' universe proving a fine partner for *Musou* mechanics. As lantern-jawed knight Frederick sweeps scores of terrified soldiers off their feet, snarling "pick a god and pray" before he launches them into oblivion, *Awakening* fans will be in raptures.

Warriors fans, meanwhile, will be right at home. This is, as ever, a game about tidying up a battlefield, wiping all those unsightly red dots off the map and steadily turning it a clean, sterile blue. You slice through dozens of hapless soldiers who stand in convenient clusters, waiting obediently to be brushed aside, while leaders and armoured guards are your more stubborn stains, offering a modicum of resistance before yielding to a bit of elbow grease. You'll sporadically flick to the map screen to guide a unit not currently under your direct control to go somewhere, before assuming command once they've reached their destination.

We've been here before, then, and while the *Fire Emblem* weapon triangle has been parachuted in along with a selection of popular characters, the concept of enemies being weak to some attacks and strong against others is nothing new. But the 'pair up' system introduced in *Awakening* enlivens the combat. You can use it to negate weapon-triangle disadvantages: coupling the axe-wielding Lissa, say, with Hinoka, whose lance can make short work of any swordsmen causing the diminutive cleric some trouble.

There are far more advantages to teaming up, too. Swapping is almost instant, while the supporting character boosts the stats of the one you're controlling, and can be called upon for single attacks to stun hardier opponents, or to nullify damage from a single incoming blow by diving across to parry it. As those gauges refill, you'll be topping up others with each hit you land: traditional *Musou*-style specials are one thing, but if both characters' meters are full, the effect will be much greater. Attacks with weapon advantage eventually put you into Awakening mode, which ignores the weapon triangle to let you dish out a beating against the odds. Two pairs of units naturally can't cover as much ground as four, but it's still more efficient to fight this way.

Safer, too, since this follows another great *Fire Emblem* tradition. Though we'd be tempted to make a case for Casual mode being a better fit for the way we tend to play *Warriors* games, a Classic option is available for those who prefer the threat of permadeath. There are certain story-crucial characters you must keep alive in each mission to avoid seeing the game-over screen, but others can perish. Then again, since you can spend in-game money on a blessing to resurrect the fallen, death isn't quite so permanent after all.

Developer Omega Force, Team Ninja
Publisher Nintendo
Format Switch
Release Out now

You slice through dozens of hapless soldiers who stand in convenient clusters



YOU DO THE MARTH
Even by *Musou* standards, the story is nonsensical. Omega Force contrives the most flimsy of excuses to assemble familiar characters from different realms, as they join forces with tolerably bland newcomers Rowan and Lianna, from whom you must choose your protagonist. It's enamel-erodingly saccharine and features a totally predictable revelation, but it's still worth playing to prepare your characters for History Mode. Each scenario here is loosely based on a previous *Fire Emblem* game, but in essence it's *Hyrule Warriors*' Adventure Mode all over again, as you're placed on a top-down grid populated by tiny sprites, each of which represents a battle of some kind. Blending short missions, arena combat and full-scale skirmishes, it should last you a good deal longer than the 12-hour campaign.

Each fort you liberate, and each villain you defeat, is essentially an attack animation from *Awakening* or *Fates* writ large, the anime cutaways and punchy soundbites slotting in so neatly you'll wonder how this collaboration hasn't happened sooner. Concerns about the relative lack of breadth in weapon types are eased when mages like Robin and archers like Takumi come into play, and there are clear differences between similarly equipped units: Chrom and Ryoma may both favour swords, but their styles are nothing alike.

Battles of such grand scale would appear to belong on the big screen; indeed, you've a choice between performance and quality, where 60fps means a minor visual downgrade. There's no such option in portable mode, though that's where *Fire Emblem Warriors* really sparkles. No handheld *Musou* has ever looked this good, and its undemanding combat and crisp theatrics are well-suited to the short bursts of play encouraged by a friendly voice on the main menu screen. Nintendo's been suggesting we take breaks for a while, but here it seems less out of concern about the player's wellbeing and more an acknowledgement that this can be calming to the point of drowsiness when played for many hours.

You can mitigate repetition, but an uncharacteristic sloppiness is harder to avoid. Key battle updates suffer comical delays: a minute after healing a character, we received a message warning us he needed help, while another stage first alerted us to a threat to the allied base five seconds before it was lost. Boxy castle interiors can mean the final flourish of a special attack is lost behind a wall, or you'll see a pegasus knight clip through a ceiling as she loops around to deliver a finisher. The camera sometimes frames specials badly, too, as if prudishly averting its gaze from the mass slaughter. And menu quirks linger on. When you've got upwards of six units to control or command, optimising loadouts and updating skill trees can be as time-consuming as the battle that follows. Selling and reforging weapons, meanwhile, has to be done piecemeal, each transaction accompanied by a single voice sample that quickly drives you potty.

Nevertheless, while the harmoniousness of this seemingly ideal pairing may have caused Omega Force to rest on its laurels, in the heat of battle this comes startlingly close to a series peak. And even as it lacks the same tactical depth and storytelling nuance, in its collaborative combat and earnest heroics, it captures the spirit of *Fire Emblem* really rather well. If it's mostly content to meet expectations rather than exceed them, that's one pleasant surprise at least.

7



LEFT Dragon Veins are a transformative tactical option in *Fire Emblem*, but here they're reduced to a glorified lock and key. Capture a fort to activate the Vein therein and you'll produce bridges across chasms. **BELOW** *Fire Emblem* favourite Anna briefly sets up shop once you've passed 1,000 kills. Reach her before she vanishes and she'll furnish you with a piece of an illustration – the completed picture unlocks a bonus History Mode map. **MAIN** Pegasus knights are vulnerable to archers, but move around the battlefield much faster than other units. They're capable of reaching areas other characters can't, though they'll also carry any paired supports over with them



ABOVE A 'Slow and steady' mode offers more guidance and interrupts the action periodically with the traditional *Fire Emblem* level-up screen. It's a cute touch but we'd recommend the 'Quick and efficient' alternative





Golf Story

Golf Story, in contrast to the traditional rags-to-riches tale, is never better than it is at the very start of the game. A young lad, under tutelage from his father and under pressure from an increasingly numerous gaggle of geese, steels his nerve and sinks a tricky putt. "When you compete in real tournaments," his father warns him, "there will be even more geese."

That hints at a surrealist riff on the underexplored golf-RPG genre, a concept mined by Camelot's *Mario Golf* games and ignored by, well, everyone else. Soon enough, you'll understand why: for all its whimsy, *Golf Story* struggles to break free from, or do enough with, the central mechanic of hitting a ball at a target.

Yes, there will be holes on greens, with pins in them. But you might be challenged to finish a hole landing only in the rough, or bunkers. This gentle subversion of the good walk spoiled is everywhere: you're repeatedly asked to hit the ball straight into a body of water, where a friendly sea turtle will pop up and propel it back to dry land. The rest of the animal kingdom isn't so helpful, mind; if a drive lands too close to a mole it'll pick the ball up and drop it in a bunker.

The narrative that surrounds all this is wry, sharply written and frequently very funny. It takes you from a traditional leafy golf course to a desert, an ice world, a graveyard and so on. Each is mined for its comic potential, yet wherever you go, and whatever you're asked to do, the result will involve hitting a ball at a target, or into a zone.

This is, after all, golf, but the occasional stretches where the game briefly threatens to become something else hint at what might have been. Gaining access to a particularly haughty golf club involves a lengthy, varied quest, for instance, but such moments are exceptions when they really ought to have been the rule. You're often left with no idea of your next objective, and can only find out through trial and error. And when you do finally get a game of golf, you'll play on courses that seem to have been designed to annoy, rather than enthral. A green might be ten feet across and sat in the middle of a lake; you might have levelled up your swing power a dozen times, but you'll tee off with a three iron because it's the only way you could find a safe spot in amongst all the creatures that are up to no good.

There's plenty here to like – the script almost justifies a playthrough by itself – but it's a little overlong, a little padded out, its obvious charms soon obscured by busywork, repetition and irritation. It's far from a good walk ruined, but *Golf Story* shows precisely why games in this subgenre have such little competition.

5

Developer/publisher Sidebar Games
Format Switch
Release Out now



CLUB SAND WEDGE
A wandering archaeologist introduces a welcome variation on *Golf Story*'s mechanical template. First he issues you with a scanner so you can hunt down your quarry, and then asks you to unearth it using your appropriately named digging wedge. This involves a short minigame of timed button presses, hitting a zone that gets smaller as you progress. Hardly world-changing stuff, but the rewards are worth it, and it's at least something different to the three-shot power system that forms the meat of the game – and most of its bones, too.



The excellent dialogue is accompanied by bursts of vibration thanks to HD Rumble. When Sidebar gets it right, the effect is an amusing punctuation mark at the end of a well-delivered line. It's horribly overused, however

Luna

Everything is simpler when you're a child. If somebody is hurting, something is wrong. So you try to make them feel better. Perhaps you even give them a hug. Funomena gives innocent compassion a virtual form with *Luna*, a short interactive fable that celebrates the physical language of VR, and its power to tap into our innate propensity for tenderness.

One still night, an owl convinces our hero, a little red bird, to swallow the last piece of the moon. Nature is thrown into disarray: the only thing to be done is to physically set things right. Doing so is a tactile and therapeutic process. You tend to each of Luna's tiny terrariums, and plant and manipulate various flora. The delicate tips of your talons prompt magical changes in behaviour: every movement becomes careful, hand motions conductor-like. Well-populated sections produce cheerful chimes and dragonflies. Eventually, an animal guardian appears, whereupon you are placed inside your creation to mediate a kind of surreal counselling session up-close.

Other creatures – a turtle, a swan, a bear and a fox – have also been tricked. Each nurses a fragment of the moon inside them. Coaxing the foreign body out involves massaging halos of light in soothing circles, producing waves of jubilant sound and song between bird and animal. There is something about the motion that instantly strikes a chord: using your hands to reach out and alleviate the pain right there before you. It is an act of instinctive communication only possible in this kind of virtual space, presented with clarity and charm.

The way in which you're obliged to enter these scenes, however, quickly grows tiresome. Basic, Simon Says interactions and constellation-sorting precede each one. *Luna* isn't the type of experience that needs sophisticated puzzles to be engaging: on the contrary, it might have benefitted from avoiding puzzles completely. Picking up stars and slotting them into place is a process of pure trial-and-error. When the number of stars and potential slots multiplies, it tips into tedium. But even untangling these sparkling three-dimensional webs with both hands, putting cosmic confusion into happy order, manages to be oddly cathartic.

Like most things in *Luna*, it complements the refrain of a children's storybook: work through your feelings, give them shape, and voice, and help others to do the same unconditionally. Indeed, the ending is designed to uplift. But there's a hint of sadness caught up in it: if only reaching out to the bad guys, with a gentle touch and a willingness to understand, was so simple out there in the real world. Perhaps, *Luna* seems to suggest, we could start with our own little terrariums.

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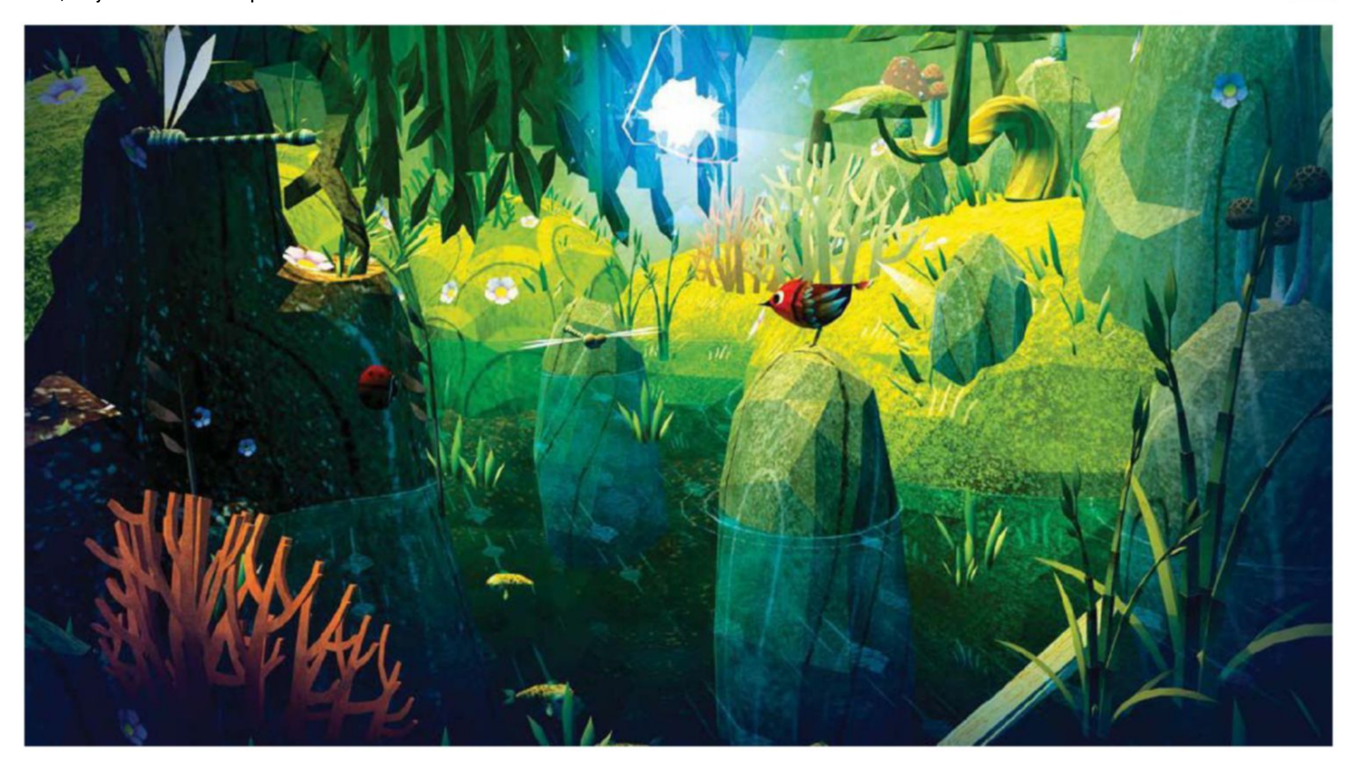
Developer/publisher Funomena
Format Rift (tested), Vive
Release Out now



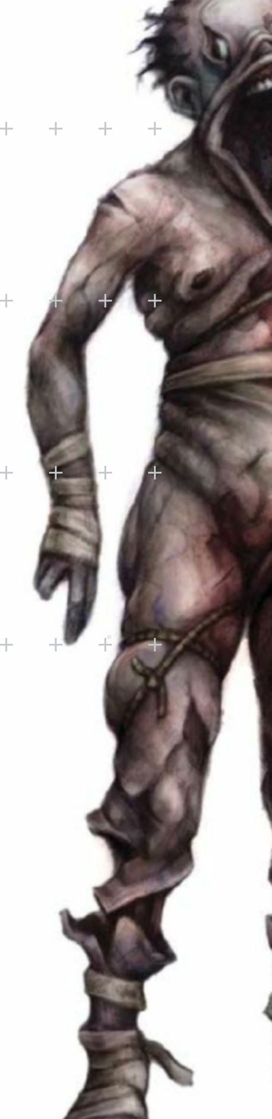
GOLDEN RATIO

Luna plays with scale to great effect. At first, you're a deific onlooker, spinning the world for a better vantage point. During key scenes, you are removed from your celestial seat, a tiny guest invited into the place you've decorated – the last uses the player's position and perspective for a poetic surprise. A PC version arrives later this month, but it's hard to imagine *Luna*'s environments will be even half as immersive when viewed on a monitor.

Space-gardening is encouraged – you can change a plant's size, orientation and colour. Not everything you've placed makes the transition to the story scene, sadly: we wish the fox's shipwreck could remain covered in flowers







Amnesia: The Dark Descent

On the tortuous devices and ambiguities of Frictional's horror masterwork

By Edwin Evans-Thirlwell

Developer/publisher Frictional Games **Format** PC **Release** 2010

"The world of *Amnesia* is a dangerous place and you are extremely vulnerable," the game announces as you start it up for the first time, white type floating against what appears to be a brick-and-mortar birth canal, viewed from the perspective of the emerging child. "Do not try to fight the enemies encountered. Instead, use your wits. Hide, or even run if necessary." This may seem a rather blunt statement of intent – Frictional breaking its own spell at the outset to forewarn veterans of horror games in which you are, in practice if not appearance, the most dangerous entity in the room. Then again, as you learn from a torturer's journal later in the game, sometimes the quickest way under a victim's skin is simply to tell them your methods, in the plainest terms. "Proceed by presenting the form of torture you are about to apply," it instructs, noting that "the point of presentation is to infuse terror. The human mind is extremely efficient, as it will trigger itself into greater fear." Respite is, the journal continues, as if not more important than agony. Torment a man without cease, and he might suffer for a few moments, but give him a chance to gather his wits, to dread anew, and you can horrify him for hours.

The Dark Descent's tumbledown Prussian castle offers many such moments of respite, and is all the more harrowing a setting for it. Libraries you can lock and barricade, for example – piling furniture in front of the door with your cursor, allowing your character's breathing to settle as you plot your route. Spacious halls where a little weak sunlight is permitted to spill through tall windows, and underground cisterns in which the burble of water is almost enough to distract you from accumulating fleshy growths and a persistent, elusive muttering. There are collectible notes and diaries, some voiced, an opportunity to seek refuge among the spectres of the past, only to return to the present equipped with ghastly insights about your character. Protagonist Daniel is a deceptively bumbling Englishman on a quest to murder Alexander of Brennenburg, the castle's baron and his former patron.

Actual threats are, you slowly realise, few, but the promise of their arrival is everywhere. Its distinctive investigation of the effects of stress and buried trauma on perception aside, *Amnesia* remains a masterpiece of old-school suspense and misdirection, a game that delights in stretching out the pause between each twist of the knife. One of the cruellest false starts comes as you explore a large flooded vault, an hour or so after a brush with a blind, invisible, aquatic entity that hunts by sound. To progress, you must turn a number of valves located around the immense chamber, one of which is reached by hopping across three crumbled ledges, your lantern swaying in your fist. As you make the third jump, something splashes into the ankle-deep water below. It is all too easy to recoil in mid-air, slipping down into the murk. Panicking, you'll thrash across the flagstones, haul yourself up an eroded staircase and turn in expectation of a savage blow. But there is nothing, no unearthly roar or advancing trail of ripples, just the creak of ancient brass and the shimmer of the surface in distant corners.

Not showing people what they're afraid of is, of course, one of horror's oldest rules of thumb. In *Amnesia* it's also something of a necessity, because *Amnesia*'s visible monsters aren't all that monstrous, even by 2010 standards – hideous in repose, their exploded, molten faces and abdomens barely held in place by bandages and rivets, but rickety in motion and easy enough to avoid or outrun. Essentially zombies with a more than usually arcane backstory, they are the most glaring indications of Frictional's modest resources (the decision to have one, jawless creature speak through a wind-up sorcerous gizmo was, in fact, taken to avoid the need for lip-syncing). The trick is that you can't look at them for long, because to do so is to plunge the already-unstable Daniel into madness, to the point of temporary paralysis, while increasing the odds of being noticed. A form of stealth ensues in which you must feel your way along walls, carefully avoiding the sight of whatever it is that's hunting you without losing track of its position – an experience that compares to the final moments of The Blair Witch Project, to which firstperson ▶

horror games at large are hugely indebted. *Amnesia* was hailed at launch for standing against the tide of rising asset budgets, reminding the creators of mainstays like *Resident Evil* that fear needn't depend on expensive creature effects; part of that achievement is that it actively punishes you for taking note of its limitations.

Often compared to elderly Gamecube adventure *Eternal Darkness*, the game's sanity mechanics are hardly a constructive portrayal of mental ill-health – they owe more to Victorian Gothic fiction than any medical research, and are highly distasteful in the way they reduce an anxiety disorder to a character stat – but they remain an extremely nasty way of fostering insecurity. Preserving Daniel's peace of mind is a continual worry, on top of the pressure to scour uninviting nooks and crannies for lamp oil and tinderboxes. Given the threat of ambush, it's unwise to walk around with your lamp lit, but to linger in the dark is to steadily bleed sanity – the field of view elongating and contracting as Daniel's heartbeat accelerates and your ears fill with the crunch of breaking eggshells, one of audio designer Jens Nilsson's more brilliant touches. The fact that reaching objectives restores Daniel a little, meanwhile, is a dangerous temptation to rush.

The effects of low sanity aren't as debilitating as they might seem, but they take an ongoing toll on the player's nerves, comparable to that of the original *Silent Hill*'s fizzing radio. This owes much to the strong sense of inhabiting a physical, vulnerable body – as in Frictional's previous *Penumbra* games, *Amnesia* allows for lifelike analogue manipulation of objects such as doors, which creates additional tension when you're trying to, for example, open one a fraction or slam it in the face of something dreadful. But it possibly owes more to the way sanity effects straddle the line between diegetic and extra-diegetic device. It's hard to know exactly how much of what you perceive can be abstracted as game design, and how much is specific to Daniel's deterioration: the array of background noises that could be voices, or just the shift and clench of wooden floorboards; the soundtrack's arsenal of glissandos, organ crescendos and violin stingers. This blurring naturally peaks when the game discreetly announces itself for a kind of malevolent torture device.

Perhaps *Amnesia*'s least celebrated feature is the skill with which it tells a story about amnesia – a much-abused premise. Daniel begins the game shortly after erasing his own memory, armed with a note from his former self charging him with Alexander's downfall. The note also warns of a terrible Shadow, a remorseless if ponderous terror, its proximity advertised by an advancing carpet of flesh. The Shadow is one of the game's goofier abominations, but the thought of its appearance is a

IT'S UNWISE TO WALK AROUND WITH YOUR LAMP LIT, BUT TO LINGER IN THE DARK IS TO STEADILY BLEED SANITY

Certain scenes of carnage take inspiration from accounts of bubonic plague outbreaks – it wasn't unusual for the still-living to be interred with the dead



Sanity was once visible as a percentage stat, but Frictional ultimately opted for inventory icons that leave your state ambiguous – a nod to *Resident Evil*'s heartbeat monitor



SHATTERED MEMORIES

***Amnesia* was once more of a puzzle game, with the dark itself as your enemy and health decreasing unless you kept the environment lit, but Frictional was dissatisfied with the resulting implausible environment designs. The sanity system was originally much more stringent, with players using potions to top up Daniel's mental resources and losing health while deranged, but Frictional designer Thomas Grip became more interested in expressing things through the mechanic. In a Gamasutra retrospective, he points to Tale Of Tales founder Michaël Samyn's concept of the 'notgame', an experience free from conventions, as representative of Frictional's changing priorities at the time.**



The game's three hub areas are largely safe, but each grows steadily more unpleasant as you complete objectives and activate mechanisms in the surrounding chambers.

powerful incentive to keep moving, as much as you might want to hang back, and it's mirrored by a shadow of another sort. Daniel's former self, players may be unsurprised to discover, was not a wholly moral man: the game's plot is as much about deciding whether his crimes are also yours as it is about chasing down Alexander. The three endings play this out a bit clumsily, but the process of reliving the original Daniel's collapse from a likeable youth into a self-deluded sadist is well-handled. The game mixes audible flashbacks with collectible documents and thirdperson accounts during loading breaks, with the import of certain dreamy motifs (and grisly noises) dawning on you as you piece together the chronology.

Horror games are seldom celebrated for their modding communities, but *The Dark Descent* has sprouted something of a movement. At the time of writing, this seven-year-old title has over 800 user-generated campaigns on moddb.com – ranging from fully fledged standalone epics such as The Great Work to an insanitary remake of Valve's *Portal*. Frictional's willingness to embrace what others make of its fiction extends to handing the sequel off to The Chinese Room, creator of *Dear Esther*. The resulting *Amnesia: A Machine for Pigs* is a more politically aware, ferocious and highfalutin' take on the same ideas but, in chopping away the sanity mechanics, also represents the reconciliation of *Amnesia*'s peculiarities with a more straightforward breed of interactive story.

Beyond its own fanbase, the game's peculiar blend of vulnerability and self-control can be traced throughout horror games today, its nearest relative being *Slender: The Eight Pages*, another tale about the perils of seeing too much. Its DNA is visible in Red Barrels' *Outlast* games, which reinvent the erosion of reality as the malfunctioning of a handicam, and The Creative Assembly's magnificently claustrophobic *Alien: Isolation*, in which the psychological profile you must keep a lid on is that of a marauding xenomorph. *Amnesia* has, perhaps, yet to attract a successor that seeks to elaborate on the entirety of its achievement, but it remains a ripe storehouse of concepts for generations of designer-cum-torturers, a reminder that a blade is never more terrifying than when it's left dangling over the subject's neck. ■

The game once featured sanity-restoring potions – introduced as a balancing measure, but discarded because they were thought to spoil the mood



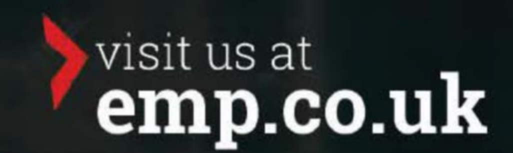




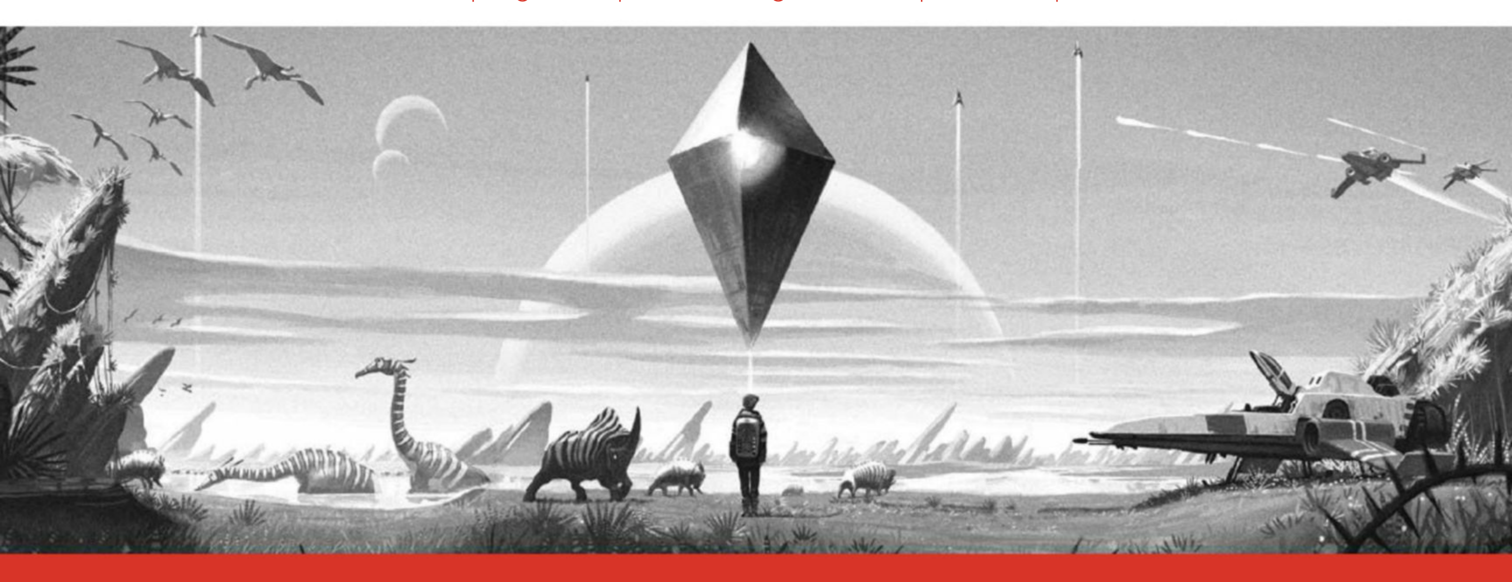
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A progress report on the games we just can't quit



No Man's Sky

Developer Hello Games **Publisher** SIE **Format** PC, PS4 **Release** 2016

A near-infinite universe of 18 quintillion planets is all well and good – but what do you *do* in it? This was the question repeatedly posed to Hello Games after the mysterious reveal of *No Man's Sky*, a sci-fi fantasy so ambitious that it left stars in the eyes of everyone who saw it. In the lead-up to release, the tone of the question changed: from curiosity, to concern, and eventually to scorn, as the final product turned out to be a game different from the dream.

This was perhaps to be expected: shoot for the moon, and you'll land among the stars, they say. The trouble was that the stars weren't particularly great either. The thrill of each new procedurally generated vista couldn't quite outweigh the thudding repetition of the identikit architecture and pointless exercises in mining. But more than a year since release, *No Man's Sky* has changed considerably. A series of regular patches and free updates have addressed a host of the launch game's issues – the previously clunky inventory is now a breeze to use, and there's more variety among alien races, flora and fauna – and made an already accessible space-exploration game even simpler, letting players call their ships to their location on a whim, offering a far more informative Analysis Visor and even a combat-free Creative mode.

Entirely new features have been added, such as base building, ground vehicles, terrain deformation and a photo mode. Now there's a reason to collect resources, as you pump them into, say, a hydroponic farm in the enviable pad you've built on your favourite crimson-turfed planet. The anniversary Atlas Rises update was the most significant of all, thanks to the addition of rudimentary multiplayer – finally offering closure on that launch-week PR debacle by allowing players to use a system of glyph-based coordinates, portals and voice chat to interact with one another.

Much of Sean Murray's enthusiastic over-promising appears to have been forgiven, with a thriving online community of fans still exchanging tall tales of space travel and animated GIFs of ridiculous dinosaur creatures. Indeed, Murray and the team at Hello Games have now delivered on both the chilled-out yet existentially challenging concept they wanted to realise, and almost all of the features they hinted at in **E**270's cover story. But there's an awkward paradox at the heart of *No Man's Sky*. The closer it grows to an experience that justifies the game's lofty launch price tag – with its added missions, objectives and quality-of-life improvements – the further it moves from Hello Games' probably ill-advised but admirable art project. At least, we suppose, there's plenty to do now. ■


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